

THE WREN TRADITION AND OTHER VISITING  
CUSTOMS IN NEWFOUNDLAND AND IRELAND

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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THE WREN TRADITION AND OTHER VISITING CUSTOMS IN  
NEWFOUNDLAND AND IRELAND

by

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A thesis submitted to the  
School of Graduate Studies  
in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Department of Folklore  
Memorial University of Newfoundland

May 2004

St. John's

Newfoundland



Library and  
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Bibliothèque et  
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Patrimoine de l'édition

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Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
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### **Abstract**

The Wren, or Hunting the Wren, is a Christmas tradition in which a group of people visit homes carrying with them an object representing a wren and reciting a traditional rhyme declaring the wren the "King of all Birds" while asking for a reward for saying the verse. Information on the custom's history and distribution in Newfoundland has been compiled through fieldwork, archival and printed sources. The Wren or Wren Boy tradition is discussed in the context of other visiting traditions in Newfoundland: the ritual visits of the mummers as well as everyday social-casual visits. As distribution of the custom in Newfoundland is primarily restricted to the Irish-settled communities it can be assumed that it came to Newfoundland from Ireland. Therefore, while an overview of the Wren tradition in Europe is given, there is particular comparative focus on the Irish tradition. Similarities in form and function between seasonal house-visits in Newfoundland and Ireland are also dealt with.

### **Acknowledgements**

My thanks to everyone who has helped me on the way to completing this thesis, which all too often seemed an impossible feat! Thanks to the crowd in Newfoundland – especially Neachel for her help in everything along the way and all our therapeutic squash games, Rob my partner-in-procrastination and Jon whose help in getting this thesis printed and submitted from across the ocean was invaluable. Thanks to the others for their support throughout this long-drawn out process – not only in helping me write my thesis, but for giving me a great two years in Newfoundland – Jackie, Pauline, Anna, Shirley, Lynnette, Nicole and everyone else. Thanks to my classmates and those in the folklore department at MUN. In particular Paul Smith for his huge bibliographical help and Philip Hiscock for many informative conversations. Thanks also to Sharon and Cindy in the office for their help whenever needed, throughout my time in MUN and after.

My thanks to those who provided me with financial support along the way: the Irish Newfoundland Partnership, the Neil Murray graduate award and WAMUN. Thanks also to MUNFLA for employing me as a graduate assistant and for Patricia and Pauline's help at all times, in particular for allowing me to use the Herbert Halpert room where I had access to Halpert's collection of articles and information on the wren tradition.

My thanks to Professor Séamas Ó Catháin at the Department of Irish Folklore for his help in putting me on the road to this thesis and for his assistance while seeking funding for my project. I also greatly appreciate his allowing me flexible working

hours over the last couple of months while I was finishing my thesis. My thanks also to Emer at DIF, the other half of the graduating class of 2000, for her help at all times.

I am grateful to the Wexford mumming groups and those in Wexford county council for their help with my research on the Wexford tradition.

A special thanks to John Ryan and Anita Veitch in Colliers who so kindly put me up and introduced me to the Newfoundland wren tradition. Also to the rest of the “wren boys” for welcoming me on their rounds and to the people of Colliers for allowing me to invade their homes at Christmas time.

Special thanks also to my supervisor Martin Lovelace for his constant guidance and help throughout this thesis, and especially for his patience as time passed. I would particularly like to thank him for making our collaboration an enjoyable one.

Thanks to my friends at home for their support when I was far away! Dom` chlann agus mo thuismitheóirí ach go háirithe as ucht na tacaíochta a thugann siad dom i gcónaí. Táim buíoch don fhoighne a thaispeánadar le linn na hama a chaith mé sa bhaile ag scríobh, fiú nuair a bhí ábhar an dreóilin scaipthe ar fud an tí! Táim buíoch as ucht na mór-chabhrach a thug siad dom le mo chuid cheartúcháin a dhéanamh, agus as ucht na deise a thugadar dom dul go Talamh an Éisc sa chéad áit.

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## **1. Introduction: Fieldwork and Methodology**

### **1.1 Preparation for Thesis**

When I originally came to study in Newfoundland, it was my intention to write my thesis on mummering here and in Ireland. I had completed my B.A. in Irish and Irish Folklore in University College Dublin the previous year, and I was delighted at the opportunity of continuing my folklore studies at Memorial. I knew Newfoundland had connections to Ireland, but it was not until I came to live in the province that I realised how strong an Irish heritage there was amongst so many Newfoundlanders. Although I knew very little about the custom of mummering before arriving, I was eager to undertake a comparative study of a custom common to both places and it was suggested to me by Professor Séamas Ó Catháin of the Department of Irish Folklore (DIF), with whom I had studied as an undergraduate, that mummering would be a suitable and interesting topic. Although there had been quite a lot of academic study on the topic in Newfoundland in the 1960s, culminating in the publication of the comprehensive work Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland (1969), very little has been written on contemporary material and no attempt has been made to compare the tradition with its Irish counterpart. Thus, for the first year and a half of the Masters programme I concentrated on gathering information on the mummering tradition in Newfoundland and in the southeast of Ireland. While researching in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), which is part of the Department of Folklore at Memorial University, I became aware that the Wren tradition was also part of Christmas customs in certain Irish communities of the province. It was not until I spent Christmas 2002 in Newfoundland, however, that I

got to see the Wren Boys for myself in Colliers, Conception Bay. It was after this experience and also after discussions with my supervisor, Dr. Martin Lovelace, that the focus of my study moved from mummering to concentrate more specifically on the wren tradition. As this tradition is very localised in Newfoundland and is unknown in the majority of communities across the province it has been somewhat overlooked by previous researchers. In this thesis I hope to address this gap in the study of Newfoundland calendar custom and to provide a comprehensive illustration of the wren tradition in the province.

## **1.2 Fieldwork in Ireland**

Mummering in Ireland, or mumming as it is known there, is very localised and is to be found only in those areas that were very strongly influenced by English settlement. Distribution of the tradition in Ireland is around the border counties in the north of the country, in north Dublin and in the county of Wexford. Until the publication of James Parle's The Mummers of Wexford in 2001, most work on the mummers in Ireland had concentrated on the tradition in the north. However, it was the Wexford mummers in particular that interested me as about eighty-five percent of Irish immigrants to Newfoundland came from the south-east (Mannion, "Tracing," 10), encompassing a good portion of the county of Wexford.

In its heyday in Wexford, around the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, mumming was a hugely popular tradition and there were as many as four or five sets of mummers in each parish. In the county today however, there are only six active groups who nonetheless perform at all sorts of functions all year round. James Parle's book on the subject is a valuable resource for any student of mumming and it

was a great place for me to start with my research. While in Ireland during the months of July and August 2002 I carried out fieldwork in Wexford and attended some mummering performances as well as, when possible, interviewing several of the participants. I had experienced something of the mumming tradition in the North the previous Christmas (2001) when I had the opportunity to accompany Criostóir Mac Carthaigh of DIF to Fermanagh and Tyrone to record some of the mummers' performances there as part of his work on the "Room to Rhyme" project (a joint project with the University of Ulster and Ulster Folk and Transport Museum on the mumming tradition). However, the mummers in the north perform the Hero-Combat play<sup>1</sup> that is very different from the performances of the Wexford mummers.

While I was in Newfoundland in May 2002, a group from county Wexford visited St. John's as part of a ceremony commemorating the United Irishmen revolt of 1800. While they were here I met Séamas Dooley, the Wexford county manager, and I told him about my project and how I was hoping to get some fieldwork done in the Wexford area. He promised to put me in touch with someone who might be able to help me and true to his word, I was soon contacted by Rosaleen Molloy, the Arts Officer at Wexford County Council and Celestine Rafferty from the Local Studies Department of Wexford County Library. Celestine gave me contact details for James Parle, the author of the Wexford book, and also for Leo Carthy, one of the main players in the mumming tradition and a man I was fortunate enough to later interview on a couple of occasions. Rosaleen Molloy and Alice Rattigan – also at the Arts office – set up appointments for me to meet each of the six mumming groups in Wexford. However, when I got home and contacted the organisers, I discovered that they were

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<sup>1</sup> The type of mummers' play that is found in Newfoundland and Ireland is the Hero-Combat play, as defined in *English Ritual Drama* (Cawte, Helm and Peacock, 27).



finding it hard to get their groups together for performances as some members were on summer holidays or had other commitments. Nevertheless, I still managed to see three out of the six groups perform and I had opportunity to talk to people from five of the six groups, as well as James Parle. Although he himself never mummered, his father was once the “King” of the Mummers and his interest in the subject stemmed from this family involvement in the tradition. As I said, Mr. Parle had interviewed about one hundred and fifty people for his book, and in the few years that had elapsed between his research and my talking to him, he told me that about thirty of the people had died. This is a reminder of the value of a comprehensive work such as Parle’s, which contains an amazing amount of information and many first-hand accounts of the tradition.

It is clear that the mummers’ house-visit in Newfoundland in no way resembles the mummers’ sword dance in Wexford. On the most obvious levels, the Newfoundland mummers do not engage in a distinctive style of dancing and the disguise and guessing game, a central part of the Newfoundland tradition, does not exist in the Wexford form of the tradition. When I began my fieldwork, I was somewhat naively hoping to find evidence in my research that would perhaps establish a direct connection between the two traditions, and I believed that the connections, if any, would be through the “traditional” mummers’ play (the hero-combat play) which existed at one time in both Wexford and Newfoundland. Although this form of the play had died out in both places, I knew of no parallel in Wexford tradition to the mummers’ house-visit – the common form of the mummering tradition in Newfoundland. Thus it seemed that connections might more easily be established

through the play. However, very few people in either Wexford or Newfoundland today remember the traditional folk play being performed, although some do remember hearing about it. In more recent times the play has been revived in some areas of Newfoundland, St. John's in particular. According to the information that can be gathered from the material collected by James Parle, the older form of the play had pretty much disappeared in Wexford by the end of the First World War. When I spoke to Leo Carthy however, he remembered "the older fellows saying those rhymes," although he did not specify whether this was as part of a performance or not, and he could even recite for me part of the doctor's rhyme:

'I can cure what I think fit/ The colic yet I can outwit/ I cure the deaf, the dumb, the blind/ And all young maids of fickle mind.' 'And what did you ever do doctor?' 'Well' he said 'My granny's brains I once pulled out/ And I washed them clearly at the spout/ In her head I shoved two cat's eyes/ And ever since she's twice as wise.' 'And what was your medicine?' 'A scoop and a half of hangman's mercy/ Three ounces and a half of miser's generosity/ A bundle and a half of tailor's trimmings/ All to be stirred with a hen's tooth and a cat's feather/ To be given to the patient on the top of a windy ditch in the shelter/ And at the end of the year he'll be no better/ So rise King George and fight again' (Leo Carthy, 17 July, 2002).

Leo Carthy is from a place called Our Lady's Island in the southeast corner of Wexford. In the course of our talk about the mummers, he also told me of another seasonal tradition that he claims is practiced only in this area of county Wexford, that of the "fools." His description of these fools was especially interesting in its similarity to descriptions of the Newfoundland Christmas house-visitors:

L: But the fools that used to, they always went out St. Stephen's night. And then on Twelfth Night, they'd always have what they call the Fools' Ball. Any few pound they'd get collecting here, there, that time, two shillings, shilling, half a crown or – <sup>2</sup>. There'd be one man put in charge of that, and then they'd

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<sup>2</sup> Where transcriptions of interviews conducted by myself are included in the thesis, a dash signifies an unintelligible word or phrase. Interruptions by the interviewer, apart from full questions, have been omitted. An ellipsis indicates a phrase or part of a phrase omitted from the transcription. Passages quoted from MUNFLA are given verbatim and follow the system of the individual contributor.

have a dance then, and a meal in a farmer's house. And they always called it the Fools' Ball but they went around from house to, on foot. They'd no cars or anything. Down along lanes and all. Wearing those, wearing those masks, we called them fools' faces, and the, the men. I remember first there'd be only young boys around school age, fifteen, fourteen, they'd go. But then the men and the women went and the men were dressed like women and the women were dressed like men so you found it very hard to – or to say, 'I think I know that fella.'

C: Would you try to guess who they were?

L: You would be trying. The, the, the people in the house would be saying 'Who's that fella there?' but they'd all know me because I'd be playing the accordion for them. That would give that away. And, eh, sometimes we brought them out. . .cos it was handy. And they'd dance a set, and a couple of songs then they'd go round with a hat and off they'd go. Happy Christmas, say, or Happy New Year. Yeah that was, that was the fools.

C: And did they come in, did they burst into the house or did they knock?

L: Ah no, they knocked the door and in they go then and, my woman opens the door and in they go. The young lads would run up the stairs, the life would be frightened out of them. Terrified. (Leo Carthy, 21 January 2003).

Mummers in Newfoundland were also called "fools," and the Dictionary of Newfoundland English has an extensive entry on the usage of this term (Story, Kirwin and Widdowson, 195-196).

When I first began on my topic at Memorial and discussed it a little with Professor Ó Catháin at DIF, he recommended not to neglect looking at other visiting traditions in Ireland, such as the biddy-boys on St. Bridget's day (February 1<sup>st</sup>), and the strawboys' visits to weddings. Although at the beginning I believed that to look into these traditions would only serve to produce an unmanageable amount of material, as my research progressed I realised that it was essential and unavoidable to take these other visiting traditions into account as there is much overlap and borrowing between different calendar customs. One of the interesting things about calendar custom in Newfoundland is that, unlike in Ireland, the house visiting element of it seems to be restricted to the Christmas season for the most part, and Halloween to a certain extent, although the Halloween house-visit is most likely to be an import

from American culture.<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to look at the reasons behind the survival of the visiting customs in Newfoundland at Christmas time only, and also to look at possible influences from other calendar custom visitors on the Christmas ones. The “fools” of Wexford that Leo Carthy describes above are just one of the groups that form a part of this complex of house-visiting traditions in Ireland, and as part of this thesis I will briefly discuss various different types of house-visits and the overlaps and inter-relationships between them. Undoubtedly these different forms of house-visits from both Irish and English tradition have influenced mummering and the wren boy tradition in both Ireland and Newfoundland.

### 1.3 Archival Research in Ireland

During my two months at home in Ireland during the summer of 2002, I carried out archival research in the Department of Irish Folklore, attempting to gather as much information as I could on the mummering tradition in Ireland. The manuscript collection of DIF is made up of two large collections: the main manuscript collection and the schools’ manuscript collection. The information in the schools’ collection was compiled as part of a scheme carried out in 1937-38 by the Irish Folklore Commission and the Department of Education along with the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation. The school children in five thousand primary schools in the

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<sup>3</sup> “Hallowe’en celebrations in my mother’s girlhood did not include mummering. However, this changed with the coming of the Americans in 1941. . . . Mummering, or ‘trick-or-treat’ was part of their Hallowe’en customs, and the American children talked about this with some local children. According to my mother, the Halloween of 1941 saw some mummering being carried out by American children and their St John’s friends. The custom spread. . . and every year more and more mummers went around on Hallowe’en from door to door collecting goodies. . . . When I was a mummer, we used to use the phrase ‘Anything for the mummers?’ though some children of our age would say ‘trick-or-treat’ (68-019D/8-10. St. John’s East).

Republic of Ireland were given various assignments which involved collecting material on different aspects of Irish folk traditions by interviewing their parents, grandparents and older members of the community. This collection comprises more than half a million pages and is a rich and valuable research resource. Although this scheme unfortunately did not extend into the six counties in the North of Ireland (The Department of Education in the North declined to participate) it otherwise provides a reasonably balanced overview of traditions in the country.

The main manuscript collection is also an invaluable resource with a wealth of information, a lot of which has yet to be exploited. In this collection, however, there was more emphasis on collecting in the Gaeltacht, or Irish-speaking, areas of the country and certain of the English-speaking areas were somewhat neglected. Most of the material in the archive was collected from c.1935 onwards, tapering off in the 1970s, and the collectors at this time regarded the Gaeltacht areas as the areas of "true" culture where traditions had been better preserved than in the English-speaking areas. Thus the majority of material in this main collection is material in the Irish language. The Folklore Commission did attempt to address the gaps in their collections and the appointment of Michael J. Murphy as a full time collector in the six counties of the North of Ireland in 1949 resulted in the collection of over eighty manuscripts worth of material. Various questionnaires issued by the Commission and distributed over the whole of the island also helped reduce this deficiency. Included amongst these was a 1947 questionnaire on Christmas customs dealing mostly with the wren boys' custom but including a question on mumming. Nevertheless, the earlier emphasis on the Irish-speaking areas may explain the comparatively small amount of material in the archives that relates to mumming, a custom that is almost

completely restricted to English-speaking areas of Ireland. The probability that the formal mummers' play was introduced to Ireland from England would explain this distribution pattern. In all, I came across only thirty-eight references to mumming in the card index at DIF, not including those in the questionnaire.<sup>4</sup> Although there is more mumming material, as yet uncatalogued, in the collection, there is significantly less material on this topic than on the wren tradition.

#### 1.4 Research in Newfoundland

Before travelling to Ireland to work with the Wexford mummers, I had been in Newfoundland for May and June of 2002 and I spent this time compiling mummering accounts from MUNFLA, a task that was made easier by numerous indexes to the mummering material given to me by Dr. Paul Smith. The Department of Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland was set up in 1968 by Dr. Herbert Halpert who had previously taught Folklore courses in the English Department. At the same time he established the Folklore and Language Archive, the contents of which are made up for the most part of student research papers. Because of Professor Halpert's particular interest in mummering, he encouraged the collection of relevant material by his students thus there is quite a large collection relating to this tradition across Newfoundland. A lot of the earlier material in particular arose out of a questionnaire distributed to students in 1967. Much of this material was drawn on by Halpert and his

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<sup>4</sup> The card index in the archives of DIF is based on Seán Ó Súilleabháin's *Handbook of Irish Folklore*. The catalogue contains fourteen main subject headings that broadly cover all aspects of folk life and folklore and each of these subject headings has a corresponding section in the archive which is assigned a letter. Material under the subject headings in both the catalogue and the archive is further subdivided into more specific sub-headings. Mumming can be found under subject title "Sports and Pastimes" and also under "Time" in the section on Christmas. In addition to the subject index, the Irish Folklore Collection can be accessed by area, by collector, and by informant.

student John Widdowson in their contributions to Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland (1969).

I spent Christmas 2002 in Newfoundland in order to carry out some fieldwork and hopefully participate in mummering myself. My first sight of Newfoundland mummers was at the end of November in the annual St. John's Christmas parade where the Tourism class from the College of the North Atlantic were dressed as mummers. Later, I arranged with a friend of mine to go mummering with him and his friends on the Saturday after Christmas. Most of his friends and their families were originally from Placentia Bay, but had resettled to St John's in the 1960s. Generally, a group of them get together every Christmas and go mummering to one another's homes. This year there was a group of about ten and I was not the only "stranger" – there was also a girl from Sweden with us who was equally eager to experience Newfoundland mummering. As my knowledge of mummering until this time had been restricted to "book-learning," I wondered how successful our visit could be when one of the most important elements of the tradition appeared to be the guessing-game, and it was obvious that no one was going to guess who I was. However, guessing identities was not a part of this visit, and even when we returned in our everyday clothes, the whole group still denied that it was us who had visited earlier as mummers.

### **1.5 Research on the Wren Tradition**

Just before Christmas, I submitted a short piece to some of the local Newfoundland newspapers, explaining my work and who I was, in the hope of reaching some potential informants. I got a couple of responses, of which one in

particular changed the direction of my research to a great extent. I received an email from a Mr. McGrath who recommended that I get in contact with his cousin who was the leading member of a wren group in Colliers, Conception Bay. In due course I rang this man, Mr. John Ryan, and talked to him about the wren tradition in Colliers. He explained to me that a couple of people who remembered this tradition had revived it in Colliers about twenty years previously. In the course of our talk, he invited me to join them on their rounds on St. Stephen's day. Until this point I had not paid much attention to the existence of the wren tradition in Newfoundland, and had come across only a few references in the archive, or in any printed sources. However, I thought that a description of it as another example of a Christmas visiting custom might make up a chapter of my thesis. As it happened, a friend of mine around the same time asked me one night had I ever heard of a rhyme that began "The wren, the wren the king of all birds. . . ." She knew a woman from Conception Harbour who had participated in the wren as a child and who hoped to perform the verse as a party piece over the holidays. I was fortunate to be able to interview this lady about her memories of the wren tradition in Conception Harbour.

I returned to Ireland soon after Christmas and carried out a couple of follow-up interviews on Wexford mumming. I also spent a lot of time in the archives of DIF, this time looking for material on the wren boys to complement the Newfoundland material on the topic. In complete contrast to the information available on the mummers, there was plenty to be found on the wren boys, mostly as a result of the 1947 questionnaire. This questionnaire alone takes up three whole volumes, totalling about 1050 pages. Unfortunately, it was not possible for me to compile all of this material due to time constraints. Instead I decided to concentrate on the material from the south of the



country, as this was where most Irish immigrants to Newfoundland came from. I did not pay much attention to the west, and very little at all to the north. This is not to say that descriptions from these areas are not relevant to my study, but it was necessary to restrict the material somehow as there was simply so much of it. What I attempted to do was to gather enough material to enable me to give a rough over-view of the tradition in Ireland, in the hope of providing some sort of context for the tradition as it existed, and exists, in Newfoundland.

Upon returning to Newfoundland and reporting to my supervisor, Dr. Martin Lovelace, he suggested that the focus of my study could be shifted to concentrate more on the wren boy tradition than that of the mummers, especially as this is an aspect of Newfoundland tradition on which very little work has yet been done. I was slightly reluctant at first as I was not sure that I had enough material to concentrate exclusively on this tradition. I was also reluctant because this would mean that I would not have the opportunity to use the material I had gathered on the mummers in Wexford. However, it so happened that I found more material on the wren, although still not a huge amount, than I was expecting in MUNFLA. A large part of this was due to the fact that the questionnaire on mummering distributed in 1967 also included a question on the wren, which brought forth about fifty-three responses, out of a total of 1317. Even at this early stage it was emerging that the wren boys was a very localised tradition. Although mummering is very widespread and found in both Irish and English settled communities, the wren boy tradition is generally only to be found in those very Irish communities – with the exception of some isolated occurrences around Notre Dame Bay. In some cases it may be known in one community, and not in another only a few miles away. A case in point is Colliers and Conception Harbour,

where it seems to have been a fairly predominant tradition, whereas many people in Holyrood, only about twelve miles away, have never heard of this tradition.

### **1.6 Thesis Outline**

What I intend to do with this thesis is to provide a description of the wren tradition in Newfoundland from the available archival and printed sources, supplemented by my own fieldwork on the subject. I wish to locate this description of the tradition within the context of other house-visiting traditions in Newfoundland – that of the mummers, as well as everyday casual visits – since to understand the form and function of the wren tradition it is necessary to have a good idea of the context in which it operates. It is more than likely that this tradition came to Newfoundland directly from Ireland (judging by the strength of the tradition in Ireland as opposed to England, and by virtue of looking at the Newfoundland distribution patterns) thus for comparative purposes I will provide a description of the Irish tradition as well as giving a general description of the European wren tradition. I will also deal briefly with the similarities between the different kinds of seasonal house-visits at various junctures of the year, and the comparable functions they serve.

## 2. Visiting Customs in Newfoundland

### 2.1 Introduction

The isolated nature of the Newfoundland outport has meant that in the past options for entertainment were very limited. It is not surprising, therefore, that visiting became one of the most significant social activities in traditional Newfoundland society. Visits were usually casual and spontaneous and there was little or no formality involved with dropping into one's neighbour for a quick chat and a cup of tea.

Gerald Pocius, in his work on the Newfoundland community of Calvert on the Southern Shore, separates visiting into two categories: the social-casual visit where no prior-arrangement is necessary, and the ritual, more formalised, visit which is usually a feature of specific occasions (Pocius, *A Place*, 179). Both the wren boys' and the mummers' visits at Christmas time are examples of what he terms the ritual visit. The social-casual visit, however, is much less frequently commented on even though, as a feature of everyday life in most outport communities, it is as important an aspect of Newfoundland culture as is the ritual visit.

This study is particularly concerned with the visiting customs of the wren boys and their place in the overall visiting tradition. This chapter will present a brief overview of casual visiting and will examine how ritual visiting – that of the wren boys and the mummers – became part of the visiting pattern

## **2.2 Physical Layout of Communities**

At first glance the physical layout of many of Newfoundland's outports seems very cluttered and gives the impression of disorganisation. The arrangement of the houses does not appear to conform to any plan and houses are built very close together. Further, properties are generally not fenced off and where they are fenced at all it is in an effort to keep animals in, rather than for the demarcation of territory. This is in marked contrast to the situation in agrarian societies such as those in Ireland and England where housing is scattered and fencing makes a strong territorial statement. In Newfoundland, land was of virtually no importance in comparison to the sea upon which most people's livelihoods depended.

It has been suggested by Pocius that the layout of the housing in Newfoundland outports is determined by social necessity. He contends that the proximity of households promoted cooperation between neighbours which was vital for survival in isolated communities (Pocius, *A Place*, 178). The nature of these closely built settlements also facilitated social intercourse which was the main form of entertainment and distraction on the island during the harsh winters. Thus visiting established itself as an important component in the social fabric of Newfoundland.

## **2.3 Visiting Habits**

### **2.3.1 Men and Women Visiting**

For the men in the community, evening visiting was the most common type of visit. For the women, on the other hand, the opportunity of visiting each other during the day, when the children and men were absent, existed. However, as explained to me

by anthropologist Tom Nemec<sup>5</sup> this opportunity was not always availed of because of a certain disapproval associated with such daytime visiting: "There was always work for a woman to be doing, therefore if she was visiting, she wasn't working" (Nemec). Somewhat the same observation was made by James Faris in his work on the community of "Cat Harbour" when he says that women didn't often visit one another in their homes as they rarely had the freedom to leave the house (Faris, *Cat Harbour*, 77). Gerald Pocius, however, provides a different view of women's visits when he describes the daily casual, spontaneous but often short visits of the women in Calvert (Pocius, *A Place*, 179). Similar to Pocius, Louis Chiaramonte notes with regards to visiting habits in "Deep Harbour" on the South Coast, that although men rarely visit during the week, women are much more mobile at this time and make many short visits to relatives and friends (Chiaramonte, "Mumming," 77-78). Pocius also noted that women and men might visit together in the evening time, with the women sometimes bringing some of their evening's work along with them (Pocius, *A Place*, 179-180). Older women on the other hand had the freedom to visit whenever they wanted and would often visit one another at nighttime to play cards (Nemec).

### 2.3.2 Children and Families Visiting

Children would often visit houses, although not as active participants in any conversation. Instead, they would sit in the corner and listen, and often bring the news back to their parents at home. As they were not recognised as being "social persons" (Nemec) their presence was not much heeded.

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Thomas Nemec is an American anthropologist who came to Newfoundland in 1967 to carry out fieldwork in the community of St. Shott's on the Southern Shore. His marriage into a Newfoundland family has enabled him to observe at first hand the interactions in traditional Newfoundland society. The comments given here are from personal communication.

They [children] are particularly free to go where adults fear to tread, as their presence is ignored, even if they are uninvited. . . . This gathering of data is especially easy for children, too, for they usually remain silent when adults are near. . . . As a result of all this, a child is seen by his parents as a reservoir of information on other families' lives (Szwed, *Private Cultures*, 100).

The role of the child as an information gatherer may have been especially of importance to the women of the community when they had less freedom to visit and find out the news themselves. Families often visited together on Sundays, in particular calling on members of their extended families (Philip Hiscock, personal communication; Pocius, *A Place*, 180).

#### 2.4 Welcoming Visitors

Newfoundlanders today are known as a very social people and for being extremely welcoming to visitors. As John MacLay Byrnes, himself a "townie" by birth, said in his 1931 memoirs: "I do not know of any country, where the twin virtues of friendliness and hospitality, were observed to a greater extent than in Newfoundland. This was especially noticeable among the farmers and fishermen in the outtharbour" (Byrnes, 115). Although strangers to the community may have been regarded with some suspicion, they were nevertheless always made to feel welcome, and indeed visitors were "prized" in many an isolated outport where strangers were infrequent (Nemec). Strangers to the community would have been received with a certain degree of formality and might have been entertained in the "room," reserved for formal occasions.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Pocius describes the contrasting functions and atmosphere of "the room" vs. the kitchen: "Again and again, the respected visitor has politely sat in a parlour like this one. . . . treated with deference and polite aloofness. . . . The visit of the stranger most appropriately occurred in this the front room of the house, just as heated neighbourhood gossip flared around the blazing stove in the kitchen" (Pocius, "Interior Motives," 5).

Friends and relatives however, were received without ceremony in the kitchen and weren't even expected to take off their boots, which was "for more socially pretentious occasions" (Pocius, *A Place*, 221). The kitchen was not considered a private space in the home, as anyone could walk in unannounced, whereas the rest of the house was rarely accessed by those outside the family except on occasions such as wakes, or when strangers or "important" visitors such as the priest or the doctor, might be entertained in the "room."

#### 2.4.1 Visiting Formalities

Generally when visiting homes in Newfoundland today a visitor will always take off his or her shoes. Robert Mellin in his book on vernacular architecture and oral history in Tilting, Fogo Island, talks a little about this:

Older residents tend to admonish visitors in a friendly way to come in without taking off their boots. At one time, there was no need to remove your footwear on a short visit; the visit would be confined to the kitchen where the floor was mopped several times daily (Mellin, 94).

A friend of mine from St. Mary's Bay also described similar circumstances:

I know at my grandparents' house, the boots were never taken off. Nanny would get angry if anyone took off their boots. 'Never mind that bit of water, that can be wiped up,' she would say, 'Come on in and sit down.' Most houses have carpet these days, and people take off the boots, but they still usually just come on in, after leaving the galoshes in the porch (Personal correspondence, September 2003).

This reference to carpeting is interesting since the introduction of carpeting is frequently mentioned as contributing to the demise of mummering, when people became less enthusiastic about letting mummers in to traipse on their new carpets, whereas previously the floors could be easily swept and mopped:

JB: No well I suppose. . .they still do a bit of it [janneying<sup>7</sup>] I think out in the outports. We dressed up a couple of years ago the last time I dressed up, that was up in Port Blandford. . . . Oh yes. It was grand. . .great. People love to see you coming too. But see since they got. . .everybody got carpet now. . . .but when we were going around janneying sure you'd go in with your old rubber boots on and all the snow would melt down around your boots and there would be a pool of water and you'd try to rig an excuse for all the water. 'Aw, that's all [right?] my son, I'll wipe that up after you goes'. . . . Sometimes they'd come around with the mop. Push the mop in around your feet a little bit to keep the water from. . .running down the seams or something you know (87-084/24-25. Port Blandford, Bonavista Bay).<sup>8</sup>

Robert Mellin also notes how carpeting and the change in layout of housing has affected visiting habits in general:

Visiting in new houses requires removing your boots so the wall-to-wall carpeting will not be spoiled, and settling in a friend's living room is not as straightforward as squatting in an old kitchen. In the old houses, all informal activities took place in the kitchen, and there was an air of informality and congeniality. Furniture was easy to move to accommodate these activities (Mellin, 90).

With the change in styles of housing, the kitchen is no longer the centre of the house and activities nowadays are distributed throughout the various rooms of the household.

## 2.5 The Visitors' Behaviour

One thing that is often mentioned with regards to the mummers' visit is that they would knock at the doors of those they were visiting to ask permission to enter which, we are told, served to remove them from their normal social role, and instead established them in the role of visitor/stranger (see Firestone in Halpert and Story, 62-75). In outport Newfoundland, neighbours and friends did not knock at one another's door and, once the light was on and the door was unlocked, they would simply enter

<sup>7</sup> Other terms for mummering are "janneying," "jenneying" or "darbying."

<sup>8</sup> These numbers refer to the file accession number followed by the page number(s) for papers stored at MUNFLA.



the house unannounced. Similar to the situation in many Irish homes, the front door was rarely used, and the regular visitor knew to use the back door which entered directly into the kitchen, the centre of activity for the whole household.<sup>9</sup>

In these days the kitchen was a large room containing the stove, a kitchen table, a couch or sofa and chairs. In most homes in outport Newfoundland in the Thirties and Forties, the family 'lived' in the kitchen, especially in winter when the kitchen stove was, in most homes, the only source of heat. Thus the dancing and 'rousing good times' took place in the kitchen. Often the revellers would 'make the place shake' and the host would have to hold on to the oven – it was perched on a neck on the old Waterloo stove – to keep it from falling down (84-457/30).

In many cases it seems almost a source of pride that outport life was such that one could walk into a neighbour's house unannounced and be made welcome. Knocking was somewhat superfluous in that admission to a friend or neighbour would never be refused and so permission was not required (Pocius, *A Place*, 174). Knocking identified someone as a stranger, and this was one of the reasons the mummers knocked: to distinguish themselves from everyday visitors and in a sense to prepare the hosts for the type of visit that was to follow.

The behaviour of the mummers was very different and was something everyday visitors would not indulge in:

A lot of horseplay usually takes place in the form of mummers chasing around the man or woman of the house. If the female host is caught a male mummer would grab her by the 'tits' and make some remark like 'They've grown since last year!' Whereas the female mummer would grab the male host by the crotch and say 'Have you used this lately, John?' . . . This behavior was accepted in the community in the mummer tradition, but once the identity of the mummers was known all horseplay and carrying on would cease and attitudes and behaviour would return to normal. . . . All the aggressive behaviour would be overlooked and forgotten (84-298/7-8. Canning's Cove, Bonavista Bay).

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<sup>9</sup> Even today in many Newfoundland houses, although there is a front door a couple of feet above ground level, there are no steps leading up to it and it serves no practical function as the back door is still considered to be the main door. This door is sometimes affectionately referred to as the "mother-in-law" door.

However, the mummers had licence to behave how they pleased and this was a characteristic element of the tradition. Usually the behaviour was relatively harmless although some reports state that ritual visitors once used the tradition differently:

Her father had told her that in his father's time the main purpose of the custom wasn't to entertain but to retaliate on someone who had offended you in any way during the year. This was the time to get even and people often resorted to fist fights and the doing of malicious damage to their neighbour's property. However, it changed from this and came to be used as a major form of entertainment, especially at Christmas time (79-414/7-8. Branch, St. Mary's Bay).

The wren boys on the other hand seem to fall in the middle ground between the mummers and the everyday visitors. Overall their behaviour was not that far removed from the everyday and not only did they make very little effort to disguise their identities, but their behaviour never seems to have been as unruly as that of the mummers. They were usually expected to entertain to "earn" their treats. An interesting fact regarding the revival of the tradition in Colliers is that Mr. William Murphy, one of the men who initiated the revival of the custom in the community, traditionally visited his neighbours on St. Stephen's Day anyhow, until a conscious decision was made one year to include the wren in the visit and from this the tradition was revived. Here we have an interesting example of the evolution from social-casual to ritual visiting, although there are more examples working the other way – with the ritual visit and wren performance "degenerating" into a simpler trick or treat type visit with no performance. The following example from St. John's might be a successor of an older more complex custom, maybe even the wren tradition or at least something very similar (Hiscock, personal communication). "In terms of visiting people, my parents. . . did not do very much of it. . . . For my father he would go around with a bunch of friends and ask people if they could see their Christmas tree. This was only

done in hopes of getting some candy or cake" (91-424/3). These examples illustrate what really is a narrow divide between the two types of visit.

Because of the similarity in form of these traditions it may be difficult to understand the motivations behind the ritual visit over and above the everyday, especially at Christmas time when everyday visiting is intensified. The children's custom has apparently changed very little over the years with the primary objective being the collection of money and/or treats. The adult tradition however seems to have been motivated by more social and intangible reasons. In Colliers for example it functions to bring Christmas cheer and best wishes to those members of the community who might otherwise be alone. Nowadays there also seems to be a conscious effort behind maintaining the tradition to preserve a part of the traditional Christmas and way of life that many people feel is slipping away. In some communities, in *Renews* and *Colliers* at least, it may represent a desire to preserve an element of the Irish culture and heritage of the people. "When asked, Frank Kane said that he felt the tradition has continued for so many years because it was brought over by Irish ancestors and kept going" (Hamilton, 7-8. *Renews*). Although ritual visiting might seem superfluous at a time when social-casual visiting was intensified in any case, another way of looking at it is that these ritual visiting customs fit in nicely with and complement the sociable culture of the Newfoundlander. The Welsh folklorist, Trefor Owen, makes this comment about folk customs:

Folk customs may be described as part of the 'superfluous' behaviour of the group. . . inherited from the past, it is true, but directly connected with the whole pattern of social life and arising naturally from it as an embroidering upon the personal, direct and frequent relationships represented by ordinary daily activities (Owen, 20).

### 2.5.1 Protocols of Visiting

Some of the work done by the anthropologists of the 1960s gives a different impression of visiting habits in Newfoundland outports and a feeling of a somewhat more reserved society. James Faris for example, implies that for men at least visiting was not an important part of their social interaction, and that the shop in the community was where the men would meet and exchange news (Faris, *Cat Harbour*, 143). Louis Chiamonte also claims that “Adults do not visit freely; when they do it is usually for a purpose. It may be that they have come to borrow something, to ask for some help, or to set the stage for a contract” (Chiamonte, *Craftsman*, 13). This would seem to be quite a contrast to the common notion of Newfoundland outport life. However, as Dr. Martin Lovelace suggested on this point – these “requests” might simply have been used as an excuse to visit. This might also provide an explanation for many ritual visits i.e. that they provided an excuse for people to call on their neighbours and to celebrate the festive season. An unmistakable example of this is in the Welsh tradition of “tooling” occurring on Twelfth Night, when a man enters the house and stays for a drink with the excuse that he thought he left his tools behind the beer barrel (Armstrong, 143).

According to Chiamonte, there are certain restrictions on “social visiting,” and one of the reasons he gives for this is that men are so often out on the boats, and rarely at home. that when they do get home they are not eager to go out visiting and leave their house. However, this is probably not true of the winter, when the fishing is not so busy and when there is much less work for the men to do. Even though news is freely shared within the household, Chiamonte claims that outside of the immediate family, even in the case of siblings, kinship ties are not that important and “A man

would no more think of coming into his brother's house and helping himself to a cup of tea and a biscuit than would any non-member of the family" (Chiaromonte, *Craftsman*, 13). The impression is given of Newfoundlanders as somewhat reserved and reticent, which contrasts with the general view of Newfoundland outport life. Of course, we must take into account the role of these anthropologists and the way they might have been regarded in the communities they were studying. For example Dr. Nemec told me that when he first arrived in St. Shott's, there were rumours circulating that he was one of at least three things: a re-settlement agent, a Russian Cold War spy, or an income tax inspector. As the members of the community were more than likely unfamiliar with the work of anthropologists and ethnographers, it is not surprising that these scholars were viewed with suspicion, and they may not have been rewarded with an accurate portrayal of the society as a result. By contrast, other ethnographers were presented with a completely different view of outport life. Gerald Pocius for example describes his experiences of visiting in Calvert as follows "This door is rarely locked and knocking is not required; neighbors and relatives walk directly into the house without any announcement or warning, and simply sit down to begin conversation" (Pocius, *A Place*, 228). Similar to the Irish, Newfoundlanders in general "have long had a reputation of sociability, freely visiting each other" (O'Dowd, 139) and visitors were eagerly anticipated for the news and stories they might bring with them. Nemec notes that "information was the gift that people had for each other" and the best way for dissemination of this information was in the house-visit, although undoubtedly information and news were also traded at the shops, or when work was being carried on in close quarters. Even with the arrival of the telephone to most households "the simple social visit" remained "the commonest forum for the exchange of news"

(Pocius, *A Place*, 179). Nemec however points out that a lot of “visiting” nowadays is done over the phone, and both that and the widespread availability of television have contributed to the decline in visiting. Of course there are still those who like to drop in for a face-to-face chat, and one such example offered to me was that of an older man, now settled in St. John’s from outport Newfoundland, who makes a point of visiting his neighbours every evening, even to spend just five minutes with them to get, and give the news (Hiscock, personal communication). In Tilting also “Fergus Burke told me his father never missed a night without ‘going on a cruise,’ his father’s generation’s way of saying ‘going for a visit’” (Mellin, 90).

Most casual evening visits were simply a couple of people sitting around chatting or playing cards, but on occasion this may have developed further with songs being sung, stories being told and, if word got around that there was music at a particular person’s house, there was a strong likelihood that more visitors would arrive and the evening would develop into a right old “time.”

One of the commonest forms of entertainment was for a group to gather at a house to exchange gossip, tell stories or sing songs. . . . Often the dances were spontaneous when a large enough group gathered in one place with a fiddler in their midst (71-24/8-9. Conception Bay).

In general, people tended to visit more during the winter than the summer as this was a less busy time of the year. Most “times” were held in the winter months “because the fishing season was much too busy a time to spend on . . . festivities. However, once the fishing was completed for the year, then the fun began. It was a time for relaxation, enjoyment and preparations for the next season” (Cull, 127). Christmas was, of course, the highlight of the winter season, and it was a time of intensified visiting – both ritual and casual. “Social visiting, either on a friend-to-friend basis, or

in the disguise of a mummer or 'janney' was carried on throughout the twelve days of Christmas" (Casey, *Traditions*, 100).

## 2.6 Christmas Visiting

The twelve days of Christmas were a holiday for everyone, and usually there was quite a degree of preparation to ensure that there would be no need to work during the period. The custom of "hauling" – where a man would be punished if he was caught working – was associated with St. Stephen's day and is described under "Christmas Customs" in the Encyclopaedia of Newfoundland and Labrador:

If a man ventured to engage in any work on that day, and it became known, a number of his neighbours would get a ladder, a gate or a door, march with it to the offender's place of work or his home and make him get on the ladder, gate or door (Smallwood, 432).

After being carried around the community like this, the man would then have to treat his "tormenters." Also under "Christmas Customs" is a description of a Fogo tradition, known until the 1880s, whereby the "culprit" in this case was "auctioned" to the highest bidder, meaning that he would "have to match the bid to pay for rum for the hauling gang or to provide a meal for them" (Smallwood, 432). In a somewhat similar fashion, people might also be punished for leaving their family on Christmas Day, as in many outports Christmas Day itself was regarded as a day to be spent with the immediate family.

That was in our father's day now, the old slogan was then. . . if a man was caught out Christmas Day other than his own home, he'd be sold for what he was worth. And. . . whatever 'twould cost for that nights drift you know, that nights entertainment. . . . that was one of the penalties, that if you was caught out Christmas Day, you'd be carried to a, to a bar or somewhere like that. . . and sold. And this would be the price you was sold fer, whatever they could drink see (65-17/C165).

According to Nemec, during the twelve days of Christmas in the community of St. Shott's one was expected to visit each of the forty-five homes in the community. If this couldn't be managed, visiting would continue after Christmas until the rounds had been completed. This was true of other places too, as an account from Moreton's Harbour indicates:

Along with mummers were visitors who came in ordinary dress. Everyone went visiting during the Christmas season, and every person in your community was invited to your house no matter if it was not until April when you got invited. You also visited everyone else in your community. Everyone looked forward to getting visitors at Christmas, as well as getting out to visit other people (91-101/28).

Although visiting during the rest of the year usually took place in the evening times, during the Christmas period people would also visit in the afternoons. At Christmas time, both men and women were expected to visit, either as a couple or separately (Faris, *Cat Harbour*, 160; Nemec). Even those who didn't normally visit did so at this time of year, and one of the reasons for this, according to Nemec, was to make up for their having neglected to visit their neighbours throughout the year – a fact which caused them some embarrassment. Ritual visits might also have served to fulfil the expected obligations in affording the opportunity to call on people one normally didn't:

Christmas in Canning's Cove is a special event. This is the time of the year when everyone is home from the woods and their fishing areas. . . . One way of being sure to see all your friends and relatives in the community is to go mummering. In this way you can visit any house without an invitation and carry on with them and have a few drinks without having to worry about inviting them back to your house (84-298/9-10).

Even those who didn't usually like to visit, also made the effort at this time (Hiscock, personal communication) and as there was usually some kind of dance, or spree, on every night during the season it was generally an enjoyable time for all.



In some cases the men may have had a particular "routine" in their approach to visiting. For example, in St. Shott's on Christmas Day one or two men would set out to visit all the men in their neighbourhood, and have a drink with each of them before taking the host with them and moving on to the next house (Nemec). In a similar fashion in Freshwater:

A man will visit his neighbour's house, and they will have a few drinks. Then they will both go to somebody else's house. They will have a few drinks there, and the three of them will then go to another house. This will continue until they have visited half a dozen houses. When they are all fairly drunk, they will go back to the first man's house and finish the night. This custom is now more popular among adults than jannying (69-29D/93).

Indeed the same description might be used for much of the activities of the janneys. Clearly, visiting in its many different forms was characteristic of the Christmas period, and it was a way of "affirming a certain set of social bonds" (Faris, *Cat Harbour*, 191).

## 2.7 Conclusion

Alongside the intensified social-casual visiting at Christmas there were the visits of the mummers and the wren boys, the "ritual visits." For this type of visit however, a different set of "rules" was observed, in particular with regards to the mummers. What is particularly interesting is that those who had visited their neighbours casually one day might return on the next as mummers or in some instances, wren boys. John Szwed notes and queries this phenomenon when he asks:

Why should parish people go visiting, masked, at a time of year when visiting as a formal gesture of reaffirmation of social and kin ties is already prescribed? . . . What is the 'value' for people who, as mummers, visit individuals whom they may have visited just a day or so before, or will visit shortly, in an unmasked state? (Szwed, "The Mask," 112).

Providing an answer to his own question, Szwed discusses how mummering offers a release for people from their normal roles in society and allows them to act as they please without risking the censure of the community. The suspension of normal behaviour also provides a means of social control whereby personal grudges can be dealt with and punishments meted out to those seen as deviants in the community, without interfering with the day-to-day functioning of the community. He also notes how ritual visiting provides the opportunity to reaffirm social ties through visiting close neighbours and friends, but also affords people the chance to visit those they normally wouldn't and thus expand their social circle (Szwed, "The Mask," 112-118; also Firestone, 62-75). It is important to keep in mind and not under-estimate the purely social element of the ritual visit and the enjoyment involved in the "times" had by both mummers and wren boys. John Ryan of Colliers summed it up by saying:

Oh yeah, it's a community thing, it's a social thing and, and eh, it's the type of thing that you spend the other fifty-one weeks of the year working and living your normal life, but Christmas everything goes by the boards. . . .if there's any excuse at all, they don't work, because they're celebrating Christmas. . . . Well I mean they worked so hard all the rest of the year. . . .then Christmas was, it was an excuse to let it all hang out and not to be normal anymore. To be more sociable (John Ryan, 18 May, 2003).

As Trefor Owen points out, "folk customs belong essentially to a particular way of life" (Owen, 17) and this chapter has attempted to provide a look at some aspects of the way of life in outport Newfoundland that provide the fitting conditions for ritual visiting traditions in the province.

### **3. Mummering in Newfoundland**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

As has been noted, most ritual visiting in Newfoundland was restricted for various reasons to the Christmas season. The most common form of the ritual house-visit in Newfoundland was undoubtedly that of the mummers. Unlike the wren boys' tradition which was primarily confined to the Irish Roman Catholic communities of Newfoundland, the mummers were found in English and Irish, Protestant and Catholic communities alike.

Mummering in Newfoundland, also called janneying or darbying, is manifested in two forms: that of the house-visit and the mummers' hero-combat play. The play was performed in Newfoundland until about the time of the First World War, but was probably never as widespread in the province as the house-visit. It has, however, undergone something of a revival in recent times largely since the founding of the Mummers' Troupe theatre group who revived the play in St. John's during the Christmas of 1972. The house-visit is the more commonly known form of mummering in the province, and this too has become more popular in recent times for a variety of reasons which I will discuss a little later.

Ritual visits, in particular the visits of the mummers, were bound by different "rules" than the everyday social-casual visit. This chapter will discuss these rules and provide a description of the Newfoundland mummering tradition as part of the complex of visiting traditions in the province. Both the house-visit and the play will be discussed and comparison made between these two forms of ritual visit and that of the wren boys.

### 3.2 Academic Interest in the Mumming Tradition

Much work on the mumming tradition in Newfoundland was carried out by a group of academics in the province in the 1960s, the product of which was the very significant book Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland, the “authority” on the Newfoundland house-visit form of the mumming tradition (published in 1969). The book is made up of a collection of essays from folklorists, anthropologists and historians. Five of the essays are written by social anthropologists and are based on their own field-experience of mumming in five different Newfoundland communities. In addition, John Widdowson and Herbert Halpert’s contributions to the volume are based on material from extensive fieldwork carried out in the province. As well as distributing questionnaires to students at Memorial University in 1964 and 1966, they also sent out postal questionnaires in 1964 and carried out numerous interviews in various parts of Newfoundland. This research established the existence of the play in fourteen communities in Newfoundland and recorded at least six complete texts, as well as gathering a wealth of information on the house-visit across the province. There is very little reference to the wren tradition in this work although Halpert includes it in his “Typology of Mumming” under ‘The Informal Visit’ (Halpert, 36).

### 3.3 The Form of the Visit

#### 3.3.1 Christmas Visiting

The twelve days of Christmas in Newfoundland were the most significant holidays of the year and looked forward to by all as a break from work and as a time

for socialising and celebrating. James Faris in his work on the outport community of “Cat Harbour” noted “Visiting characterises this period; both men and women are found visiting another house or entertaining friends in their own house during the entire period” (Faris, *Cat Harbour*, 160). Preparations for the holidays began weeks beforehand – sufficient wood was cut and plenty of cooking and baking done well in advance – to ensure that there was as little work as possible to be done during these days. As well as being a season of intensified social-casual visiting, one of the highlights of the season for many people was to go out mummering.

Mummering was an important activity during Christmas. My Nan and her friends would dress up in old clothes and make their rounds. According to my grandmother, everyone loved mummering, young and old alike. It was a part of Christmas that allowed the people to get together, and since there was only fifteen families in the small community a real sense of togetherness was felt (91-418/4-5. Parker’s Cove, Placentia Bay).

Although in some places the mummers’ house-visit may have begun on Christmas Eve, or even a couple of days before Christmas as in Twillingate, Notre Dame Bay (73-159), the mummering season in most communities began on either Christmas day or St. Stephen’s Day (Boxing Day),<sup>10</sup> and continued until the sixth of January – generally known as Twelfth Day or Old Christmas Day. The sixth of January in particular was an especially busy night as it was the last of the season, after which life resumed its usual routine.

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<sup>10</sup> In Newfoundland the 26<sup>th</sup> December was known as St. Stephen’s Day until 1934 when it was officially changed to Boxing Day by the Commission of Government (Smallwood, 432). This change was obviously not popular everywhere as an account from Bell Island illustrates: “We called it Saint Stephen’s Day. The Bishop said down here that he heard that they were calling it Boxing Day. I hope you don’t he said because I’ll box your ears. It is Saint Stephen’s Day” (90-311/8). In Ireland the 26<sup>th</sup> December was always referred to as St. Stephen’s Day, and this is the term used in the wren song. Throughout this thesis I will refer to this day as St. Stephen’s Day.

### 3.3.2 Adults vs. Children. Males vs. Females

As with the division of groups of wren boys, in some communities there were both adult and child mummers. Where this was the case, it was usual for the “little” mummers to go around during the day while the “big” mummers came out after nightfall. Any number of people could have been in a group of mummers and although there was no rule against the participation of women, it is very probable that in earlier days it was an all-male tradition. However, Gerald Sider in his work Mumming in Outport Newfoundland makes a distinction between the urban mummers’ parade and play versus the outport house-visit and says “While the urban mummers’ parade was primarily a men’s affair, in outports women participated in mumming as fully as men” (Sider, 20).

Undoubtedly, in more recent times both men and women participated in the tradition and an account from Cow Head on the Great Northern Peninsula emphasises the role of women as janneys:

The middle aged usually janneyed together as well but this group consisted mostly of women. Some men janneyed but often they stayed home for the women to janney. . . . women would janney more than men because this was the only chance for them to get a break from the house. They never went out otherwise, except maybe to attend a wedding or funeral. This gave them another chance to do so (84-325/15-16).

### 3.4 Costumes and Disguise

The main “event” of the mummers’ visit was the guessing game where the hosts tried their best to identify the mummers and the mummers attempted to remain unknown for as long as possible. Thus having a costume that completely disguised the person was very important. Whether or not they were eventually identified by the hosts the mummers would usually reveal themselves before leaving the house.

However, as the guessing game was something of a challenge to the hosts, the longer the mummers remained unidentified the better fun there was to be had.

The costumes of the Newfoundland mummers were very similar to those of the wren boys in Ireland although disguise and costume do not appear to have been a feature of the Newfoundland wren tradition. The Newfoundland mummers may have worn old clothes turned inside out, pyjamas, underwear over clothes, quilts or sheets tied over the head and body and sometimes even oilskins (Figure 3.1). According to Halpert and John Widdowson, there were attempts when costuming to make “the wearer appear grotesque or frightening” (Widdowson and Halpert, 155). Costumes were often padded with pillows and such-like to further disguise the form of the person, and some people might even disguise their gait in an attempt to baffle their hosts. Boots were worn on the wrong feet, and the most essential part of the disguise was to cover the face. Although in more recent times people were more inclined to wear store-bought masks, or “false faces,” before these types of disguises were freely available faces were covered with flour bags, curtain materials, pillow cases, or perhaps cardboard masks with holes cut out for eyes and mouth.

These masks were often made of an old pillow case with holes cut for eyes, nose, and mouth. The holes were then decorated around with lipstick or stove-black. Sheep wool or animal hair was often used for hair on these masks. Depending on the individual, other touches were often added such as horns, high hats or caps and similar touches (73-159/6).

A type of “veil” was often hung over the face or an alternative was to blacken the face with stove-black, shoe-polish or burnt cork (Widdowson and Halpert, 148-9). Faces may have been blackened underneath the facial covering to make it harder for those who would try to peep under the masks to identify the mummer.



**Figure 3.1:** Mummers in St. John's, Christmas 2002.

### 3.4.1 Dressing in character

Some mummer house-visitors may have dressed in character as in Burgeo on the southwest coast: "They tried to be different but some characters always seemed to [be] there. For example, there was always a bride, a soldier or sailor, clowns, and a Santa Claus" (84-327A-B/18-19). Judging by fragments of a play text collected here, it appears that the hero-combat play also existed here at one time. The appearance of specific characters amongst the house-visitors might possibly have been influenced by characters from the play. Alternatively, as Professor Martin Lovelace pointed out, old bridal gowns or old soldiers' uniforms are the type of outfits that might easily be in the wardrobes of many households, and would be ideal for dressing up in. They would not be easily recognised, and in some of the smaller outports finding clothes that



wouldn't be recognised would not have been easy. In the Codroy Valley one solution to this was to keep the clothes sent by American relatives to use for dressing-up:

From the New England states, and more specifically from Boston, came the yearly box of clothes. Relatives there would be presented with huge amounts of outdated and unwanted clothes. . . . And so, during Christmas, these outlandish clothes found a use. Feathered hats, sequinned dresses and ill-fitting furs, paraded into kitchens along with over-stuffed 'long-johns' and rubber clothes, adding to the mummer's disguise (71-39/72).

Disguises might change from night to night so that the mummers would not be recognised too easily the following night.

### 3.4.2 Cross-dressing

When disguising themselves, men often dressed as women and women as men in an attempt to make themselves harder to identify. Again, this form of disguise was also common to the Irish wren boys and will be dealt with further in Chapter Seven. Christmas time has long been associated with a certain kind of reversal and departure from normal roles, both social and sexual. This notion of reversal of the normal order may have been one reason for the mummers' use of clothing of the opposite sex, but it was also a convenient way of further disguising oneself. As there was very little material available in outport Newfoundland, wearing the clothes of the opposite sex provided an easy and convenient means for disguise. In order to figure out the sex of the mummers, the hosts had a particular trick that they would use. If the mummer was seated and an object thrown into their lap, it was the instinct of the females to open their legs to catch it – as they would if they were wearing a skirt or dress – whereas men would bring their legs together to try and catch the object. This trick is noted in quite a few descriptions of the mummers.

### 3.4.3 Disguise of Voice

Not only would the mummers disguise their person, but they would also disguise their voices. On arriving at the house, they would knock at the door and request entry saying something like “Any mummers (a)llowed in?” in ingressive speech. Those who found the ingressive speech difficult to produce may have put a small potato or something similar in their mouths to alter their voices (84-325/22). Once inside the house, the hosts would ask the mummers a number of questions in an attempt to establish their identity. Sometimes, when asked questions such as “Where are you from?” they would reply by saying they were from some far-off place such as the North Pole or maybe just from some distant community.

Once inside the house, the first question asked of the mummers is ‘where are you from?’ The answer of the jannies from the areas is always ‘Harbour le Cou’. . . . This probably seemed like a far off place to many of the inhabitants in the area (88-323/20-21 Rocky Harbour, Bonne Bay).

“Janneys in Cow Head always came from Harbour la Cou [sic]. They would never say if they were from up or down the road but from Harbour la Cou” (85-325A-B/30).<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes the mummers carried sticks or “splits” with them which they used to knock at the door when they arrived. They were also used to ensure the hosts didn’t get too close when they were trying to figure out the mummers’ identities.

Not all jannies would talk as well as others and during the guessing one or two jannies might do most of the talking. If a host seemed to be asking more questions to a less qualified talker then one or more of the other jannies would give that janney a poke on top with their ‘split’ – an indication to stop talking. Sometimes the host would approach a janney and observe his eyes and mouth. If the host came too close the janney would often lift his ‘split’ – making out as if to hit the host (88-323/23-24).

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<sup>11</sup> Rocky Harbour is on the West Coast and Cow Head is on the Great Northern Peninsula, both quite a distance from Harbour le Cou on the South Coast.

A more recent introduction to the tradition was the “jann(e)y stick,” or “ugly stick” which was also used as a type of musical instrument: “They would carry a janny stick, which was a stick with felt tins attached to it, and some would have harmonicas or anything else they could find to make a noise with. . . . With a jingle of the janny stick, the people would sit back and watch the jannies dance and sing” (94-220/4). Like the wren tradition, entertainment was expected from the mummers and was an integral part of the visit, much enjoyed by the hosts. Generally however, the younger mummers were not expected to entertain.

### **3.5 The Mummers' Behaviour**

#### **3.5.1 Lack of Inhibitions**

The fact that the mummers knock at doors before requesting entry is an element which clearly delineates this visit from the normal social-casual one. Melvin Firestone has written about how the mummer fits into the role of stranger in the community and removes himself/herself from the normal social role for the period of the visit (Halpert and Story, 62-75). The knock at the door is a way of announcing from the outset that this is not a normal everyday visit. There was none of this formality with the wren boys' visit however and, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, it seems in many ways that the wren boys' visit falls in the middle ground between the social-casual visit and the ritual mummers' visit.

The mummers had licence to behave in ways that they normally would not during an ordinary casual visit. As Firestone notes “By donning disguises they make themselves unknown and so escape their customary social roles” (Firestone, 63). Mummers' behaviour was usually quite uninhibited and their disguises offered people

the opportunity to let loose and act as they pleased, without being censured for their behaviour: "Some mummers 'carry on' in the house. They may sit on the lap of the women, probably, pinch and squeeze their legs or even put their arms around them and attempt to kiss the young girls" (84-331A/B/18-19). The free flow of alcohol at this time may also have contributed to the lack of inhibitions. The hosts themselves might also act in a way that they would not normally with visitors:

Some hosts are aggressive in the manner of guessing the identity of the mummers. In most cases, the hosts are more aggressive than the mummers. Some hosts will chase after the mummers and say 'I'm going to see who you are before you leave here.' The hosts often try to pull off your mask and would also say 'How's your old bird tonight?' and search for your groin. This sort of reaction would bring on laughter for all that are present (84-331A/B/19-20).

### 3.5.2 Hostile Undercurrents

According to Melvin Firestone, although most people enjoy mummering and having the mummers visit, "covert hostility is undoubtedly a factor" in the tradition (Firestone, 75). This "other" side of the mummering tradition is evident in this account from Avondale, Conception Bay:

The janneys made much noise and when they arrived at a house they usually beat on the door with their sticks. All the children, and many grown people were afraid of them. One of the reasons for this was that they often beat up people whom they met along the road. Mrs. Meany told me of a young Penny boy (about fourteen) who was beaten up and died just outside their house, about sixty or seventy years ago. They sometimes injured people with their sticks, especially if they 'had it in for someone'. Janneying seems to have been the occasion for many vendettas. Mr. James Costello told me the story of the time the janneys 'got' Uncle Bill Costello around 1885 or 1890. Uncle Bill was boy at the time, and he knew who they were when they knocked so he hid on the inside of the huge fireplace they had in those days. They couldn't break down the door so they caught him by sliding down the chimney. Uncle Bill was always afraid of them, for he was only fifteen when this happened. Mr. Costello explained that they would not hesitate to use a rope or a chain to injure a man who had wronged them during the year. Again the law could never touch the wrong-doers among the janneys (71-42/49-50).

The notion of mummering as an outlet for aggression (Szwed, *Private Cultures*, 118-9), but a socially approved and sanctioned one is discussed throughout many of the articles in Christmas Mummering in Newfoundland. The interdependent nature of Newfoundland outport society meant that preserving harmony was crucial for the successful functioning of the community, and therefore anger and frustration could not be expressed publicly and every attempt was made to avoid confrontation. The notion of repressing anger and avoiding conflict was also brought to my attention in a conversation with a Newfoundland woman on the mummering tradition. She pointed out how mummering was the outlet for all this suppressed anger and frustration – the expression of which was in itself also important – in a way that was acceptable in the community. As James Faris put it, mummering was a “sanctioned deviation” (Faris, “Mummering,” 142) or a “socially approved outlet for their anger” (Sider, 21) allowed only at this time of year. This enabled individuals to resolve their personal conflicts at this time without carrying over to the rest of the year and thus still maintained the social system essential for survival (Szwed, “The Mask,” 116). In short, rowdy behaviour in the guise of a mummer was not censured as it would otherwise be, as it was regarded as an acceptable outlet for conflict and hostility that normally was not permitted within the norms of outport society. As one informant in a MUNFLA student paper put it:

Mrs. Hutchings also expressed other views. She felt that it allowed people to let themselves go and was a psychological release for a quiet, introverted person and he now had the opportunity to become a bit more extroverted. It also served to give the release of certain feelings because things, that couldn't be said ordinarily, could be said now to get even because the face was covered (84-325/17-18).

Those who were perceived to have stepped outside the boundaries of acceptable social behaviour throughout the year might become victims of the mummers at this time: "Mummers could often become very similar to charivaris when fishing people used their disguises to harass those who might offend local values" (Cadigan, 15).

There is no mention of this kind of undercurrent to the wren tradition in the province. The disguise of the mummers was what gave them licence and, in a sense, the power to move outside the social norms but as the wren boys did not wear any kind of disguise they didn't have had the same freedom. Perhaps mummering fulfilled whatever need there was for an outlet for aggression whereas the wren boys on the other hand had primarily an integrative social function.

### 3.5.3 The Hobby Horse

Although for the most part mummering was an experience enjoyed by all, the mummers did sometimes terrorise the household, in particular those groups of mummers who brought the hobby horse with them:

He also remembered how afraid people were of the 'hobby horse'. . . . 'Twas really two people dressed up' he said. 'One was like the ordinary janney and he drove the hobby horse around by the reins. The other fella was the hobby horse you see. And he was dressed up in some kind of skin from the chest up.' . . . 'I know it was all furry and hairy and the face looked like a bear more than a horse, and the mouth had board in it for jaws and there was nails drove in the board. Now this fella on the back of the 'hobby horse' when he pulled on the rein the mouth would open and when he pulled on the other one, it would close. You could hear the jaws go 'chop, chop' just like real teeth cracking. That'd tear you up. I used to see it grabbin' wood and tearin' it. People were some afraid of it, boy. It wasn't a nice thing, you see. The last goin' of it wasn't allowed any more.' . . . the hobby horse was never allowed into a house with the rest of the janneys. According to him the hobby horse usually chased the janneys walking the roads of the community, in order to frighten them (73-99D/23-5).

No scholar has yet undertaken a full study of the hobby horse tradition in Newfoundland. However, in her work The Newfoundland Mummers' Christmas House-Visit, Margaret Robertson has compiled substantial material from MUNFLA on the distribution and descriptions of the hobby horse in the province (Robertson, 107-132).

Violent behaviour was sometimes an aspect of the mummering tradition, in particular in earlier times, and this led to the banning of mummering in 1861 after the murder of a Protestant man in Bay Roberts, supposedly by a group of Catholic mummers (Story, 178).

### 3.5.4 Unmasking

If the identity of the mummer was guessed correctly, then he or she would always be expected to unmask and once the masks were off, the mummers reverted to their normal, everyday behaviour: "When you are hiding behind a mask, you can say almost anything but when you remove it you start to think about all the foolish things you're after doing" (71-43/41). At this point, the visit would continue in the way a normal social-casual visit would. The mummers at this stage might also provide entertainment with a bit of music, singing or dancing. The common consensus in most mummering accounts seems to be that even if the hosts didn't succeed in identifying the mummers correctly, the mummers would unmask. As Gerald Sider noted "To mum well is to conceal and then reveal" (Sider, 6). This is because if the mummer fails to unmask for his hosts and remains anonymous, he is avoiding having to reciprocate the hospitality offered him, and is thus violating acceptable social behaviour. Louis Chiamonte notes "no adult mummer would take a drink without

first removing his mask, for, if a man were to take a drink without exposing his identity, he would not be able to fulfil the obligation he incurred by accepting the drink" (Chiaramonte, "Mumming," 86). John Szwed also remarks that, for the most part, mummers desired to be recognised and in Gerald Pocius' description of mummering in the community of Calvert on the Southern Shore, he comments that there it was unacceptable for the mummers *not* to unmask, whether recognised or not: "Such anonymity negates the whole purpose of mumming – to visit" (Pocius, *A Place*, 193). The following account describes the usual events.

If and when identification was made and the jannies unmasked, then the behaviour of the jannies usually changed. They wouldn't move freely about or act, in any way, aggressive. They would usually sit in their seats, talk to the host and his family, and eat and drink the food that was given them. Sometimes they would ask the host and his wife to join them. They would also often invite the host and his wife to visit each of their houses before Christmas was over (88-323/26-27).

Usually after the mummer unmasked, he/she was offered refreshments. However, in some cases refreshment was given before unmasking, and watching the mummers eat and drink was added opportunity for the hosts to try and get a peek under the masks or to somehow identify the mummer's behaviour. The amount of available drink was an indication of how long the hosts wished the mummers to stay. In some cases while the men drank, the women would partake of the hostess's Christmas cake: "They did this because after the unmasking it was expected that they would return to their normal roles" and for women to drink was seen as being "hard" (71-44/25). In some communities the mummers didn't unmask at all, and the aim of the mummers was to remain unidentified "Not revealing your identity was a feature of janneying on Cow Head and this was the main aim – to disguise oneself in such a way so no one would



be able to identify them" (84-325/26). One account suggests that remaining unidentified was more common for younger mummers:

If the jannies didn't unmask the guessing would often continue on the next day. . . . Several of the people. . . said that often they wouldn't unmask – that much of the fun was in seeing how many houses one could visit without being guessed. This was especially true of younger jannies. However, in the case of older jannies (social equals to the host) they would often unmask in the homes of their friends even if they weren't guessed (88-323/24-5).

Sometimes if one member of the group was identified, then the hosts would find it easy to identify the rest, due to their knowledge of the social and kinship ties of the mummers. For this reason, people may have occasionally mummered with others outside their immediate circle (Sider, 6).

### 3.6 The Hero-Combat Play

The mummers' play as it existed in Newfoundland was the hero-combat play type.<sup>12</sup> This is the same type of folk play that was performed by the mummers in Ireland, and still is by the mummers in the north. Although Halpert and Widdowson discovered evidence for the play in fourteen Newfoundland communities, there is not

<sup>12</sup> The play usually begins with a "presenter" figure arriving and announcing the arrival of the performers while demanding space in the room for the play to be performed. This character might be called the Captain, Father Christmas or a Fool. The play can be roughly divided into three parts, the Presentation, the Combat with Cure, and the "Quête" (Helm, *The English*, 28). When the play was performed in people's houses the presenter may first have entered alone and called the characters in one by one. Alternatively the whole group might have entered and stood in a semi-circle, stepping forward to say their part when called by the presenter. Generally the first character introduced by the presenter is one of the antagonists in the combat. He gives a boastful speech before being challenged to a fight by the next character, which leads to the combat. During the fight the "hero" kills his antagonist, and then calls upon a doctor to cure him. The doctor is always a comic figure and makes great use of hyperbole in his speech. He has usually come from afar and can cure all manner of ills, with somewhat bizarre remedies: "I have a little bit of hare's grease and mare's grease/ The wig of a weasel and the wool of a frog/ And twenty-four ounces of September fog" (Change Islands play. Halpert and Story, 200). After the revival comes the "quête" when a group of characters appear who have no direct impact on the plot of the play. Their main function is to demand and collect money from the audiences and usually they are characters such as Beelzebub, little Devil Doubt, Big Head, Miss Funny etc.

a lot of contextual information available on the play, primarily because it had disappeared by the First World War and was remembered by only a few.

Three of the Newfoundland play texts are published in Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland – one from Salvage, Bonavista Bay, one from St. John's and the third from Change Islands on the north east coast (Halpert and Story, 186-207). There are some clues to be gleaned from these texts as to the origins of these plays. In the St. John's play for example, the defeat of St. George by St. Patrick suggests an Irish origin for the play as does the featuring of the character of Dan Donnelly – a famous Irish boxer of the early nineteenth century. According to Halpert and Story, Dan Donnelly is unique to this version, but his presence would obviously suggest an Irish origin, or Irish influence at least. Alex Helm also suggests that the fact that the Doctor does not give an account of his travels is characteristic of an Irish play (Halpert and Story, 189) and Alan Gailey also supports this theory in his article Chapbook Influence on Irish Mummers' Plays (Gailey, "Chapbook Influence," 11).

The Change Islands play is probably of English origin; the man from whom this text was recorded attributed the introduction of the play to Change Islands to an English schoolmaster in the late nineteenth century. The two combatants in this instance are King George and the Turkish Knight, but some of the characters that appear after their battle and the revival – the characters of Bold Hercules and Pickedy Wick for example – have no known parallels in any other play texts.

The Salvage cast of characters includes those of Oliver Cromwell and the Wren. Cromwell as a character is mentioned in the earliest written account of the mummers in Ireland, a county Cork manuscript from the early 1800s which claims to

be a copy of a lost 1685 manuscript. He is more often found in Irish accounts than English, probably because of the role he played in Irish history and the strong feelings about him amongst the Irish people.<sup>13</sup>

The Wren appears in the Salvage play, as he does in a number of versions of the play from the North of Ireland. The appearance of both Cromwell and the Wren would surely seem to suggest an Irish origin for this Salvage text, even though the two battles in the play are King George fighting the Grand Turk and then the Valiant Soldier fighting the Turkish Knight. It is possible that this version of the text was a result of the overlap of two discrete texts, hence the two combats, although it is not unknown for two battles to take place during the play.

Although the mummers' play is thought to have been introduced to Ireland from England where it was a much stronger tradition, it may have travelled to Newfoundland through both English and Irish channels. The hero-combat play in Ireland existed in those areas most strongly influenced by the English: the north of the country – the border counties in particular – north Dublin and the southeast corner of the island. Many Newfoundland-Irish immigrants came from this southeast corner and it is quite possible that they might have brought the play with them. Although mummering in Wexford today bears little or no resemblance to the “traditional” form of the play with the combat, death and revival, it did evolve from the hero-combat play with the great changes happening only towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. By this time of course the Irish were well established in Newfoundland and any significant immigration to the province from Ireland had died off.

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<sup>13</sup> Cromwell also appears in all known versions of the nineteenth/early twentieth century Christmas Rhyme chapbooks in Ireland (see *Chapbooks and Traditional Drama*, Boyes, Preston and Smith).

### 3.7 The Mummers' Play vs. the House-Visit

There is very little obvious relationship between the forms of the mummers' play and the mummers' house-visit. Although the earlier British folk drama scholars for the most part either ignored the tradition of the house-visit completely or dismissed it as a degeneration of the mummers' play, in more recent times Martin Lovelace has proposed that the house-visit may actually be the older form of mummering. The thrust of his argument in the article "Christmas Mummering in England: The House-Visit" is that the folk play came about as an adaptation of an earlier Christmas visiting custom "essentially [as] a way for working-class people to raise money at Christmas" (Lovelace, 271) and that at one time the masked house-visit was probably as widespread, if not more so, than the folk play. Lack of documentary evidence for the mummers' house-visit however, has meant that the attention of most folk drama scholars has been concentrated on the mummers' play.

As I have already discussed, the central and most important aspect of the mummers' house-visit was the guessing game. For obvious reasons, this tradition was generally carried out amongst social equals – friends and family who knew one and another – as to visit strangers who couldn't possibly identify the mummers would negate the purpose of the visit. Generally during the house-visit the visitors were given food and drink in exchange for the entertainment they offered, but there was no attempt to collect any kind of subscription from the household. A major part of the folk play, however, was the *quête*, or the collection of money. This custom was designed not for visiting friends and neighbours and social equals, but rather as a vehicle for gaining access to houses at Christmas-time that were generally inaccessible for the rest of the year, and doing so for the purpose of soliciting money.

In Ireland and England the mummers focused their visit on those houses where they knew generous donations would be forthcoming: in the houses of the landlords or big farmers for example. Performing the play provided the perfect excuse for entry into the house, in the name of offering entertainment, although there was also that unspoken threat of bad luck or potential mischief if hospitality was refused.

In discussing the wren tradition later on in this thesis we will notice how one of the most significant differences between the traditions in Ireland and Newfoundland is that money was usually sought as a reward by the Irish wren boys, but generally not by the wren boys in Newfoundland. The simplest explanation for this difference is the fact that traditionally there was no upper class in most Newfoundland outports and there was little or no money in circulation. This may also explain why the play died out and the house-visit remained in mummering tradition. The house-visit, as well as the wren tradition, suited the environment and culture of Newfoundland more so than did the hero-combat play. The folk play did not survive in Newfoundland society because the collection of money was not feasible in "the more homogenous nature of Newfoundland outport society" (Lovelace, 279). Gerald Sider argues for the play as being more of an urban phenomenon in Newfoundland, because of the more distinct class divisions in the bigger towns and cities, and also notes that in the outports the local merchant was rarely visited by mummers performing the simple house-visit (Sider, 15). Halpert also briefly touches on this same notion as to why the house-visit survived and the play did not:

In no area have we yet found an explanation of why the traditional performances of the play died out. . . . we can only assume that. . . the mummung of this latter kind [the house-visit] has continued to live because it serves useful functions. For some reason the mummers' play, perhaps because of its formal nature, did not take on a new functional significance and was allowed to die out (Halpert, 60-61).

The demise of the play after World War I may also have been influenced by the great loss of life of young men at this time, as this was the demographic from which most of the mummering performers would have been drawn. The casualties of this war did have a negative impact on the tradition in England (Helm, *The English*, 31).

### 3.8 Contemporary Mummering

Although many of the sources from MUNFLA expressed their apprehension that the mummering tradition was fading and was sure to die out soon, in recent years mummering in Newfoundland has definitely undergone a revival. The tradition has actually gone so far as to become somewhat “iconic” in Newfoundland and is regarded by many as epitomising the essence of what is unique about Newfoundland and what makes it different from the rest of mainland Canada. What happened to bring this about, according to Gerald Pocius in his article “The Mummers Song in Newfoundland: Intellectuals, Revivalists and Cultural Nativism” was a combination of the Mummers Troupe’s revival of the folk-play in the early 1970s, the attention drawn to the house-visit by the earlier mentioned anthropologists of the 1960s and most importantly on a local and provincial level the big hit that was the Mummers’ Song released in 1983 by the popular Newfoundland musical duo, Simani, from Fortune Bay. All of this came about in the wave of cultural awareness and Newfoundland patriotism of the 1970s and onwards.

Although the “promotion” of mummering as something “unique” to Newfoundland began with the academics and the “cultural elite” at a time when most Newfoundlanders regarded it as “a simple ordinary holiday activity, which was not different from so many other elements of daily life” (Pocius,

<http://www.folklore.ee/rl/pubte/ee/bif/bif1/pocius.html>) it was not until the release of Simani's song that it became clear that mummering had indeed become a symbol of identity for many Newfoundlanders. Pocius describes the text of the song as "an informant's ethnography" of the tradition (Pocius, "The Mummers Song," 65), and clearly it struck a chord of recognition and nostalgia with many Newfoundlanders. The success of the song also directly influenced the development of the tradition as nowadays many mummers bring a stereo with them on their rounds and play the song as they enter into the house – something which I myself witnessed with the mummers in Colliers during Christmas 2002. The success of Simani's song clearly illustrated that mummering had become *the* symbol of Newfoundland identity, not only amongst the academics and revivalists, but more importantly amongst ordinary Newfoundlanders (Pocius, "The Mummers Song," 80). Today, mummering and a Newfoundland Christmas have become inseparable and currently there are innumerable products available at Christmas, and indeed year-round, that feature mummers or scenes of mummering. Mummers appear on Christmas cards, in works by local artists, on t-shirts, wrapping paper, Christmas ornaments – and the list goes on.

Many Newfoundlanders, and perhaps in particular those who are away, nostalgically associate mummering with all that is good and special about Newfoundland and Christmas at home, and I have come across a couple of examples that illustrate to what extent this is true. During the month of October 2002, the family of a friend of mine here in Newfoundland were having a big wedding and the whole family, including those who lived away, were going to be together in Newfoundland for the first time in a long time. Not only did they have a big wedding celebration, but

they decided that as they were so rarely together that on the second day of the wedding they would celebrate an early Christmas: have a Christmas dinner, sing Christmas songs and of course, dress as mummers. In a similar fashion, there was segment on television about a holiday package in Trinity Bay where a particular hotel offers Christmas celebrations in the middle of July, especially for those Newfoundlanders who are home visiting in the summer, but who won't be around for Christmas. These celebrations include a big turkey dinner, Christmas carolling and once again, the mummers play a large role in the festivities. Mummers have also been known to perform during the summer for travellers on the ferry ride from Nova Scotia to Argentina – offering tourists a look at the unique culture of Newfoundland.

Newfoundlanders away also continue to carry on the tradition. A friend of mine from Moncton, New Brunswick, told me of a Newfoundland family who lived on their street and who went mummering every Christmas, even though the rest of the residents on the street weren't familiar with the tradition. Mummering also continues amongst the large Newfoundland population of Fort MacMurray in Alberta.

### **3.9 Conclusion**

Although the wren tradition may have been as common as the mummering tradition in Irish Catholic settlements in Newfoundland, it is interesting to see how one has become symbolic of Newfoundland culture, whereas the other is little known outside the communities in which it is practised. As we have seen, the growth in the popularity of mummering has been influenced by various different factors at different levels whereas the wren tradition on the other hand has received very little attention and is unknown by the majority of Newfoundlanders. The wren tradition, like



mumming, could also be perceived as an important symbol of Newfoundland culture, and Newfoundland-Irish culture in particular. Newfoundland is one of the only places outside of Europe where the tradition is practised, and the consistency of verse and practice in the province would seem to indicate faithful preservation of the form as it was introduced here from Ireland.

## 4. An Overview of the Wren Tradition

### 4.1 Introduction

Within Europe the wren tradition is known to have existed for the most part in Ireland, England, Wales, the Isle of Man and France – the Celtic countries. Even though it is almost impossible to determine a place of origin for the custom, evidence from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries indicates that the strongholds of the tradition were Ireland and the Isle of Man. Although there is quite a body of short articles and descriptions of the wren tradition in those places where it occurs, no folklore scholar has as yet undertaken an in-depth study of the tradition. That is not to say that this topic has been entirely neglected as scholars from other disciplines have done substantial work on the subject. There are two main works on the wren and on wren tradition in particular that I have drawn upon for this chapter. The first of these is a 1997 book dedicated to description and analysis of the wren tradition, entitled Hunting the Wren, by Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence. Lawrence is trained in anthropology as well as biology and has written much about human-animal relationships. Although this work is an invaluable source of information, in my opinion Lawrence over-indulges in interpretation of the symbolism of various different elements of the wren tradition, something that I myself do not wish to become overly involved in. However, this work does undoubtedly contain substantial knowledge of the tradition. My second main source of information, and one which Lawrence herself draws heavily upon, is the work of Edward Armstrong, in particular his 1958 publication The Folklore of Birds. Armstrong was a naturalist and ornithologist who was also interested in the lore of birds, and certainly his chapter on

“The Wren Hunt and Procession” is very informative and a useful source of knowledge. Armstrong and Lawrence seem to share much the same views with regards to their analysis of the tradition, and incline towards perceiving the hunt as the remnant of an earlier more ancient ritual related to the winter solstice and belonging “to the great category of rites which have as their object the banishment of evil influences at a seasonal crisis” (Armstrong, 161). I will discuss something of these approaches and interpretations a little later in this section.

#### 4.2 The Wren Tradition in England

Even though there is not as much evidence for the wren tradition in England as there is in Ireland and the Isle of Man, Elizabeth Lawrence suggests that the scattered distribution of the custom in England might be interpreted as evidence for it once having been practised all over England (Lawrence, 60; Gill, 428) and Edward Armstrong claims that “Contrary to general belief, the Hunting of the Wren was an English custom” (Armstrong, 142). However, Ronald Hutton in his book The Stations of the Sun suggests an Irish origin for the tradition and proposes that it might have spread from Ireland along trade routes to France and Britain (Hutton, 97). He further suggests that it may well have been Irish migrant labourers to England who carried the tradition with them there, a theory that was also voiced by Professor Martin Lovelace. W.W. Gill in his analysis of the tradition in A Second Manx Handbook however, argues against this and supposes that the tradition was *brought* to Ireland from South Wales “The Irish custom so closely resembles that of South Wales that it may well have been introduced into Ireland since the Anglo-Norman invasion; a native Gaelic custom would have preserved or developed dissimilarities” (Gill, 429). However, the

strength and spread of the tradition in Ireland would appear to indicate the existence of a well-established custom, more so than in Britain. Thus it might be presumed that the tradition in Britain was imported from Ireland. Although most of the versions of the rhyme that survive in Ireland are in the English language, it is significant that what is said to be the earliest account of the visiting tradition, refers to the verse being recited in the Irish language:

he is carried about, hung by the leg, in the centre of two hoops, crossing each other at right angles, and a procession made in every village, of men, women, and children, singing an *Irish catch* importing him to be the king of all birds (Vallancey in Frazer, 319, my emphasis).

#### 4.2.1 Evidence for the Tradition in England

The wren song associated with the tradition in Britain is generally different from that used in Ireland. Where the rhyme similar to that which we know from Ireland and Newfoundland (“The wren, the wren, the king of all birds”) did exist in England – in Essex for example – it is proposed that the rhyme “but probably not the custom” was introduced from Ireland (Armstrong, 142). Armstrong also notes that in Buckinghamshire it is believed that the tradition of chasing the wren, there called “toddling,” may have been introduced by an Irish boy. However, in this instance the custom may have been confused with the Welsh tradition of “tooling,” which took place on Twelfth Night, the same time as the wren boys in Wales.<sup>14</sup> A somewhat corrupt version of the rhyme – “The Ram, the Ram, the King of the Jews” – was also known at the royal naval base at Devonport, where Hutton suggests “a large number of Irish sailors must have visited” (Hutton, 99). In many places in England St. Stephen’s day was a major hunting day, and some of the instances Armstrong quotes

<sup>14</sup> Tooling as described in *Folklore of West and mid-Wales* is when a man would enter his neighbour’s house under the pretence that he had left behind his tools, but really just as an excuse to partake of a beer with his neighbour (Davies, 67).

as examples of wren hunting and the wren tradition may simply be part of this general hunt, e.g. "Westmorland. Indiscriminate shooting of birds occurred on St. Stephen's day. Cumberland. On St. Stephen's Day men and lads shot birds" (Armstrong, 143). Perhaps he is suggesting that the hunting of birds on St. Stephen's day may be a degeneration of the ancient wren ritual and although Gill also seems to echo this theory (Gill, 380)<sup>15</sup> there is no clear evidence to support this. The widespread practice of bleeding animals on St. Stephen's Day might bear more relation to the tradition of shooting and hunting on St. Stephen's Day than does the hunting of the wren.<sup>16</sup>

In Suffolk, according to Armstrong, the tradition of the wren took place on St. Valentine's Day and a reference from Derbyshire, where the Christmas tradition of the "Derby Tup" is practised, states that "Hunting the wren on Sunday was called 'jenty'" which might imply that this was a common Sunday custom (Armstrong, 143). "Jenty-hunting" is also defined in the English Dialect Dictionary as "hunting wrens to death with sticks and stones" (Wright, 358).

The wren tradition is strongest in the west and south of England (Armstrong, 143) areas which were, as Hutton notes, most "exposed to direct contact with eastern and southern Ireland" (Hutton, 97).

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<sup>15</sup> "Although Cornwall has no discoverable memory of having hunted and plucked the wren, a custom which has probably survived from that of wren-hunting is mentioned in Cornish Feasts and Folklore, page 14: 'On St. Stephen's Day . . . every man or boy who could by any means get a gun went out shooting. . . .' In Cumberland 'St. Stephen's Day is kept as a general shooting holiday; the woods and fields echo all day with the desultory practice of 'sportsmen', and the pigeon-shootings held for prizes" (Gill, 380).

<sup>16</sup> Trefor Owen explains this practice in his work on Welsh folk customs quoting from Wright and Lones' British Calendar Custom: "The periodical bleeding of livestock was believed to be good for the health and staying power of horses and other animals doing hard work" (Owen, 40).

### **4.3 The Wren Tradition in the Isle of Man**

The wren tradition in the Isle of Man seems to have been widespread across the island and exists there in the present day. The most common Manx legend told about the wren tradition is that there was once a beautiful siren who would entice the men of Man out to the sea and to their deaths. A local knight devised a plan to eliminate this siren but she managed to evade him by turning herself into a wren at the last minute. However, there was a spell cast on her that meant that once a year she would be turned back in to a wren, thus once a year all the men and boys of the community hunt the wren from sunrise to sundown in an attempt to get rid of this siren for good (Train in Swainson, 39). There seems to be some conflict in the earlier sources as to when the custom was carried out. An oft-quoted source from the early eighteenth century describes the hunt as occurring on Christmas Eve but in more recent times the tradition has been carried out on St. Stephen's Day.

#### **4.3.1 Characteristics of the Tradition in the Isle of Man**

Usually in the Isle of Man the wren was carried upside-down, hanging by its feet from the intersection of two hoops at right angles to one another. These hoops were generally decorated with greenery and ribbons (Daiken, 208). Although this mode of transporting the wren was not very common in Ireland, the account from Charles Vallancey quoted above describes a similar way of carrying the wren in Ireland. Not only did the wren boys from Ireland sometimes resemble those from the Isle of Man in this fashion, but the reverse was also true as the Isle of Man wren boys occasionally carried the wren on the end of a pole, common in Irish tradition (Kelly in

Armstrong 152). Another method of carrying the wren was to pin the corpse to a pole, with wings outstretched (Dyer in Armstrong, 154).

The wren boys in the Isle of Man usually buried their victim by the sea (Daiken, 208) or in the churchyard (Armstrong, 153). While the burial was taking place, the people gathered would make a circle around the bush and perform a dance as in a description of the custom in the 1700s “the people formed into a big circle with the Bush in the centre and performed the Hunt the Wren Dance, a prominent feature of which is homage to the Wren” (Douglas in Lawrence, 51) also described by James Frazer in The Golden Bough: “The burial over, the company outside the churchyard formed a circle and dance to music” (Frazer, 318-9). A Welsh folk dance website mentions this dance in a brief description of the tradition in the Isle of Man, but interestingly claims that “The Manx Folk Society have *invented* a round dance, called the Wren House” (<<http://fp.millennas.f9.co.uk/wmorevnt.html>> my emphasis). It is likely that the dance as it is performed today is a revival based on the older dance tradition. The contemporary dance involves a group holding hands in a circle with one individual in the centre of the circle holding the wren bush. Each person in the circle in turn dances up to the person in the middle who is holding the bush (Lawrence, 78). Nowadays there are also competitions between the different wren groups with prizes awarded in various categories (Lawrence, 79).

Similar to their counterparts elsewhere, the Isle of Man wren boys solicited money at each place they visited, and if they were pleased with the offering, they would give the host a feather from the wren. This feather was believed to bring good luck and was used in particular by the fishermen on their boats to keep them safe for the year. Although the wren was usually buried at the end of the day, sometimes “the

carcase might be brought on board one of the boats of the herring fleet to bring good luck" (Armstrong, 154) and Swainson notes that "Manx herring-fishers dare not go to sea without one of these birds taken dead with them, for fear of disasters and storms" (MacTaggart in Swainson, 39). In later years when the visit was carried out without a live bird, one of the ribbons from the wren's bush may have been given to the hosts as a token of good luck instead (Lawrence, 73). For the custom to bring good luck, one source offers the belief that the bird should be caught in the period from dawn to sunrise (Townley in Lawrence, 141). If the Isle of Man wren boys were dissatisfied with the reception they did, or didn't, receive, then they might sing "a derisory verse" of the wren song (Caine in Lawrence, 47). As with the tradition in some places in Newfoundland, Manx tradition held that the wren boys' visits should cease at noon (Kermode in Lawrence, 141).

The wren tradition in the Isle of Man is viewed as "possibly the oldest surviving custom in existence" on the island (Killip in Lawrence, 71). Lawrence suggests that one of the possible reasons for survival in the present day may be as a result of the revival of interest in the Manx culture and language over the past few years, as parents now encourage their children to participate in this distinct part of their culture in an attempt to preserve a sense of identity particular to the Isle of Man (Lawrence, 74-5). Indeed, many similar revivals of customs and traditions such as this are seen as a means of preserving that "sense of difference [which is] . . . at the heart of people's awareness of their culture" (Cohen, 2). This idea might also be applied to the revivals in Newfoundland of the wren boys of Colliers and the mummers' play as both of these were self-conscious attempts to revive customs regarded for various different reasons as unique to Newfoundland culture.



#### 4.4 The Wren Tradition in Wales

Although the wren was also hunted in Wales, he was usually not killed (Armstrong, 151) and was paraded in quite an elaborate house/box with glass windows, bedecked with ribbons. Traditionally the Welsh wren boys visited on Twelfth Day (January 6<sup>th</sup>), also true of the tradition in France. In the 1960s in Wales the wren hunt took place on St. Stephen's day, a change that is attributed to later Irish influence (Armstrong, 150). The wren was usually carried in his house on top of a type of bier, which was made out to be a heavy weight, and the wren boys sought contributions for the wren, often being given beer as well as money. It was considered lucky by the women of the house to give the wren a ribbon (Davies, 65) and curiously, this is also mentioned with regards to the wren tradition in Boyd's Cove, Newfoundland but not in any other Newfoundland community that I have come across, nor any Irish source. As in other places, if the Welsh wren boys were not well received they might "curse" the household and chant a short verse to this end: "Come wind, blow and overthrow this house" (Armstrong, 151). It is mentioned in accounts of the Welsh wren tradition that a special effort was made to visit the homes of recently married couples which Armstrong proposes may have been an acknowledgement of the new couple's "temporary distinction in the community" (Armstrong, 151). Another notion is that the good luck associated with the visit of the wren might extend to grant the marriage "fruitfulness" (Gill, 377-378).

A late nineteenth century article on the tradition in Notes and Queries claims that the wren was well respected in Wales as opposed to the persecution it suffered in Ireland (MacCulloch, 492). Contrary to custom in Ireland, the Welsh wren boys

usually attempted to keep the bird alive and this may be related to the notion expressed by Sylvie Muller that that good luck for the bearers depended on the wren being kept alive (Muller, 144).

Hutton notes that the wren song is found all across Wales “but the custom itself remained confined to Pembrokeshire and adjacent parts of Cardiganshire and Carmarthenshire, where it occupied the niche filled elsewhere among the South Welsh by wassailing and Mari Lwyd” (Hutton, 98). It is interesting to note that a similar complementary pattern is true of the wren boys and mummers in Ireland. Although I would propose that the wren ceremony did once exist countrywide before the introduction of mumming, in those communities where mumming flourished the wren tradition gradually declined. Caoimhín Ó Danachair’s<sup>17</sup> distribution map of the wren tradition in Ireland in 1957 shows an absence of the wren tradition in the north of the country (Ó Danachair, “Some Distribution Patterns,” 121), but the Wren remained as a character in many of the mumming plays particular to the North.

#### **4.5 The Wren Tradition in France**

As already mentioned, the wren ceremony in France was also usually carried out on Twelfth Day, but traditions in France differed somewhat from those in Britain and Ireland. Gill notes that no song has been recorded in connection with the wren ceremony where the tradition occurs in the south of France (Gill, 380) and although songs about the wren have been recorded in Brittany, these were independent of any ceremony and very different to the songs found in Britain and Ireland (Gill, 400-401). One of the prevailing features in the descriptions of the French tradition is that the

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<sup>17</sup> Ó Danachair also writes under the English version of his name, Kevin Danaher.

weight and size of the wren are frequently exaggerated. This can also occur in Welsh tradition. For example, in an 1800 translated account by the French travel writer Soinnini we are told that the body of the wren “is suspended on the middle of a pole, which two men carry on their shoulders, as if it were a great burthen[sic]. This whimsical procession parades around the town; the bird is weighed in a great pair of scales” (in Armstrong, 142). In the same vein, another account tells us of the wren being brought to the “seigneur” “tied with strong new ropes in a wagon drawn by four black oxen” (Armstrong, 147).

The exaggerated weight and size of the bird is the theme in many of the versions of the wren verses found outside of Ireland. This notion is implied through the descriptions of the large weapons needed to kill him, the transport necessary to move him and the utensils needed to carve him up, all of which we know to be unnecessary considering the real size of the bird. This characteristic common to the British and French traditions does not extend to include Ireland, where this wren rhyme is unknown. However, as Armstrong points out, it serves to “indicate the homogeneity of French and English wren traditions, and support other indications that there was a relationship between the rites observed in France and south-west England” (Armstrong, 149).

In another wren ritual at Carcassonne in the eighteenth century, the first person to kill a wren on the hunt was declared king and in the evening time he led the other members of the group through the town writing *vive le roi* on various doors of the village. On Twelfth Day the wren was brought to the priest at High Mass and then to the most prominent citizens of the village where money was collected for that night's banquet and dance (Armstrong, 145). In another area of France the hunt took

place on Christmas Eve and when the wren was caught it was presented to the priest who released it after midnight Mass. This custom is an interesting juxtaposition of “official” vs. “folk” religious beliefs where the priest participates in what is regarded by many as a pagan or pre-Christian custom.

#### 4.6 The Wren Tradition in Scotland

According to Edward Armstrong, there is very little evidence for the wren tradition in Scotland (143) and where it did exist, the wren was caught on New Year’s morning and the ceremony simply involved “adorning its neck and legs with ribbons, and allowing it to go free” (Lawrence, 59). Hutton notes the existence of the tradition in nineteenth century Galloway, the area of Scotland closest to eastern Ireland, where it was held on New Year’s Eve “As Christmas had been suppressed in that region” (Hutton, 91). There were of course other similar Christmas visiting-luck customs in Scotland such as that of the young people dressed in cowhide visiting houses, reciting verses and, after admittance to the household, blessing the members of the house (Ramsay in Frazer, 323).

#### 4.7 The Wren Verse

According to Lawrence the wren song beginning “The wren, the wren the king of all birds,” found in the Irish and Newfoundland traditions, is more common than the song found in British tradition “We’ll away to the wood, said Robin to Bobbin, etc.” (Lawrence, 80).<sup>18</sup> This “Robin Bobbin” song is not known in Ireland and has been recorded in places in Britain where there is no evidence of a wren ceremony. Gill

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<sup>18</sup> See Appendix II for texts of wren songs.

notes with regards to the texts of the “Robin Bobbin” song collected by the Folk-song Society in England that “there is no suggestion that it ever accompanied an actual wren procession” (Gill, 396). It has also transferred to the United States, where it is included in some collections of ballads and where it is known as a nursery song, or as part of a game (Owens, 252). The Irish wren song is also sometimes heard out of context – as a children’s song for example.

An overlap between the two verses is possible however, and some versions of the “Robin Bobbin” song finish with a verse similar to that known in Ireland and Newfoundland. For example, in a Manx version from 1896 the last few lines are: “The wren, the wren the king of all birds/ We have caught, Stephen’s Feast-day, in the furze/Although he is little, his family’s great/I pray you, good dame, do give us a drink” <<http://www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/fulltext/mb1896/p064.html>>.

The “Robin to Bobbin” song is made up of many repetitive verses, telling of hunting the wren and describing the exaggerated size and weight of the wren. For example in the talk of arrangements for carrying the wren back from the hunt, using a large cart or some other similar mode of transportation is discussed: “‘How shall we get him home?’ says Robin the Bobbin. . . ‘We’ll hire a cart’ says Robin the Bobbin.” There is also talk of cooking and eating the wren and descriptions of how he will be divided up amongst the hunters: “‘He is boiled, he is boiled’ says Robin the Bobbin. . . . ‘The eyes for the blind’ says Robin the Bobbin. . . . ‘The bones for the dogs’ says Robin the Bobbin” (ibid.). Although no version of this verse exists in the French tradition either, a song about from Brittany about the death of the wren also suggests an exaggerated size and weight for the bird:

The butcher and all his assistants  
Cried out at the tops of their voices

They were simply unable to hold him

....

Four carts upon iron-shod wheels  
Have carried his heathers to Nantes,  
And enough are still left in the house  
To furnish four fine feather-beds! (Gill, 400).

#### 4.8 The Origins of the Tradition

Edward Armstrong talks about the wren “cult” as having being brought to Britain and Ireland by megalith builders during the Bronze Age (Armstrong, 166). He suggests that the ritual was brought from the Mediterranean up the west coast of France and links the distribution of megalithic Gallery Graves and the wren hunt, positing that the “Wren Cult” was a part of the culture that produced these Gallery Graves (Armstrong, 164). As proof of this theory he points out that neither the Gallery Grave nor the wren cult occur in Ulster or southwest Scotland. However, the frequency with which the wren appears as a character in the mumming plays in the North of Ireland would suggest that the tradition did exist there at one time, gradually being displaced by the mummers’ play, with the Wren nevertheless maintaining a role as a character in the drama. If such is the case and the tradition did once exist in the North of Ireland, this would discount Armstrong’s theory. To attempt to conclusively link archaeological remains with a calendar custom is perhaps a little far-fetched also.

Although there is no evidence for the wren tradition or hunt in any ancient or medieval literature (Hutton, 97), the tradition is nevertheless seen by some scholars – Armstrong for one – as the remnants of a much more ancient and meaningful tradition. As the sacrifice of the wren occurs in the depths of winter around the time of the winter solstice Armstrong argues “The Wren Hunt represents New Year ceremonial having as its purpose the defeat of the dark earth-powers and identification

with the hoped-for triumph of light and life" (Armstrong, 166). In this way, the wren tradition is seen as paralleling the mummers' play in which the themes of death and revival are representative of the change in seasons and the notion of the spring vanquishing winter:

[the wren] could be logically identified with the powers of darkness which at the time of the winter solstice appear to threaten all life and vegetation. Hence the hunting of the wren is a parallel to the Mumming plays, in which the champion of darkness is slain and the world brought back to life  
<http://www.old-glory.co.uk/cuttv.html> >

Frazer, in The Golden Bough, discusses the rituals of worshipped animals killed once a year, and links the wren tradition with this body of ancient ceremonies: "immediately after death he is promenaded from door to door, that each of his worshippers may receive a portion of the divine virtues that are supposed to emanate from the dead or dying god" (Frazer, 322). One of the "divine virtues" cited here is that of fertility, which was often closely associated with the wren tradition: "wren hunts and wren songs of West-European folklore derive from ancient fertility ceremonies" (Wentersdorf, 191). Not only did the sacrifice of the animal encourage new life, "a natural part of the life-cycle, where death leads to a new birth through the ceaseless round of the season" (Stewart, 22) but the wren boys could themselves carry good wishes for fertility with them, their good wishes having "efficacy for the production of larger families" (Hibernicus, 404). As has been noted in the wren tradition from Wales, the wren boys made a special effort to visit the homes of the newly-married and as Gill suggests, this might indeed have been as a result of this belief in the power of fertility in the wren boys.

That the wren alone of all the birds was sacrificed is significant, as in most places it is believed to be unlucky to hunt, kill or anyway interfere with the wren for

the rest of the year. He was a revered bird in ancient times; claimed as king by the ancient Greeks and Romans, Italians, Spaniards, French, Germans, Dutch, Danes, Swedes, English and Welsh (Frazer, 317) and the translation of “wren” into many of these languages is indicative of his standing.<sup>19</sup> In Ireland the Irish word for the wren was the Druid’s bird (*draoi-éan*) and the Druids were believed to be able to prophesise the future “from listening to the sounds of a captured wren” <<http://www.old-glorv.co.uk/cuttyv.html>>. Because of the purported connections with the Pagan religion, it has been suggested that hunting the wren was encouraged by Christian rulers as a means of “stamping out superstitions” through killing the bird of the Druids (Hibernicus, 399). Some of the legends told of the wren betraying St. Stephen or Christ would seem to support the idea of him as an anti-Christian animal, and some sources even say he possesses the blood of the devil (Lawrence, 98). On the other hand, he was sometimes said to have a drop of God’s blood in his system, which meant that his blood had curative properties (Lawrence, 35). Gill, however, disputes the association of the wren with the druids and claims that:

The sense of ‘druid’ was attached to the word in or since the 17<sup>th</sup> century when *dryw* replaced an equally fictitious term for a druid – *derwydd*, coined in the 12<sup>th</sup> century when the long-forgotten order was rediscovered in classical authors and a native name for it became a patriotic necessity (Gill, 425).

#### 4.9 Conclusion

For those scholars from the survivalist school such as Frazer and Armstrong who believed in ritual origins for the custom, the form of the tradition that they wrote about from the nineteenth/early twentieth century was something which they regarded

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<sup>19</sup> For example, the French for wren is *roitelet* (little king), the Spanish *reyezuelo* (diminutive form of king), Swedish *kungs fogel* (king’s fowl). For more examples see Lawrence, 23.



as a degeneration of an older custom with the participants or “folk” of their time unaware of the deeper significance of their actions. As Leslie Daiken wrote in 1949:

The wren boys, though they know it not. . . are the last custodians of a very pagan notion, taken over by the early Church. The 27<sup>th</sup> of December was the beginning of the New Year, according to old reckoning. And the bands of innocents [are] simply dramatising the widespread belief that the creature which was slain during the winter solstice, at its close starts a new lease of life (Daiken, 211).

However, statements such as this are clearly rather condescending toward the participants in the tradition – the mere “folk” who, it is implied, don’t really know what they’re doing. It is important to remember that functions of customs will change over time, as society changes, and this is not to say that the tradition becomes “degraded.” Customs are adapted to meet current needs and even though the original motivation and purpose for the wren tradition might be forgotten, the fact that it survives is surely a sign that it fulfils some function for those who witness the spectacle as well as those who actively participate. As Ronald Buchanan points out, “People rarely practice customs or hold beliefs that lack relevance or meaning in their way of life” (Buchanan, 74-75). Although they might have evolved into mere excuses for socialising, drinking and making merry, the wren boys’ visits nevertheless “gave an approved means of entering the houses. . . at least in the heart of winter, in which the convivial spirit of the season could be released” (Owen, 69) and herein lies their relevance in the time after the religious significance had faded. Although the custom was no longer used to ritually banish the darkness of winter and encourage the onset of spring “Going from door to door to seek gifts of drink, food, and money helps to reinforce and maintain feelings of community among country folk and represents a new way of celebrating the winter season that reflects changing social conditions”

(Owen in Lawrence, 65). This is of course an equally valid, and valuable, motivation for the tradition of the wren.

## **5. The Wren Tradition in Newfoundland.**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The tradition of the wren boys in Newfoundland is very localised unlike the other Christmas visiting tradition of the mummers. Although, as we have seen, there is evidence of the tradition in Britain, and also in France, it was much more predominant in Ireland, and it is likely to have been introduced to Newfoundland from there. The questionnaire distributed across the island of Ireland by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1947 found that the wren tradition was widespread across the country, although much less common in the north than elsewhere. Given this prevalence it is likely that many of those who emigrated to Newfoundland knew of the tradition and those who practised it in the homeland were likely to have continued to do so in Newfoundland. Indeed the wren tradition in the province is primarily restricted to the predominantly Irish and Roman Catholic communities of the island. Nevertheless, over time the original form of the wren tradition as it was introduced to Newfoundland was undoubtedly influenced by other Irish as well as similar English customs.

I have been successful in compiling ninety-three references to the wren in Newfoundland: from the archive sources at MUNFLA, from various published books and newspapers and from interviews and conversation. I have used only ninety-one of these sources, however, as two of the references from the archive can be discounted for apparent copying between students. These figures do not include four other accounts in student papers which are clearly based on secondary research only.

## 5.2 Distribution

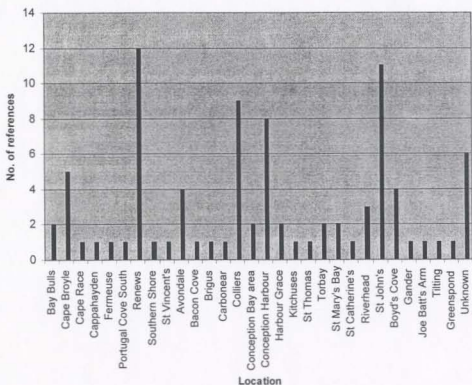
The compiled evidence indicates that the wren tradition was strongest in Conception Bay North, from Avondale to Carbonear, along the Southern Shore from Bay Bulls to Cape Race (in particular in Renewes) and in the Riverhead area of St. Mary's Bay. Apart from the Avalon Peninsula there are only a couple of other accounts of the tradition (Figure 5.2). The wren appears in Tilting, Notre Dame Bay and a report from the primarily English-settled and Anglican community of Greenspond, Bonavista Bay, cites the tradition as extant there in 1932. A small nucleus of the tradition was the community of Boyd's Cove, Notre Dame Bay, where it was a Catholic tradition only: "Catholic men of the town led by the same man each year. . .go from door to door of the Catholic houses with a stuffed bird held up in a fir tree" (72-59/21). According to the Encyclopaedia of Newfoundland and Labrador, some of the earlier settlers in Boyd's Cove were from Carbonear, Conception Bay, so it is possible that the tradition was brought with those settlers from this area where it was well established. However, an alternative explanation of origin is suggested by Leo Donahue of Boyd's Cove in a 1965 interview: "That's where they got it, me grandfather, at Joe Batt's Arm, Grandfather Donahue. That's the first I ever heard it" (65-17/C200). Although I did not come across reference to the tradition in Joe Batt's Arm in any other MUNFLA sources, there is a description of the tradition in a 1988 ethnographic study of Joe Batt's Arm (Cull) resembling very closely the tradition in Boyd's Cove. It is very likely that settlers carried their traditions with them as they moved from place to place and this might also explain the presence of the tradition in St. Mary's which was settled by people from Renewes, another area where the wren tradition was particularly strong (Table 5.1).



The Wren also appeared in some places in Newfoundland as a character in the Mummers' Play: in Tilting and also in Burnside and Salvage, Bonavista Bay and possibly in other places where the play existed. In Tilting some of the wren verse is spoken by the character Devil Doubt. This overlap in the traditions is not unusual and is not particular to Newfoundland: wren boys from county Cavan in Ireland, for example, borrowed some of their verse from the lines of Devil Doubt and Beelzebub in the mummers' play (Gailey, *Irish Folk Drama*, 81).

Table 5.1:

### Overall wren distribution



Of the sixty-seven relevant references to the wren tradition compiled from the manuscript collection at MUNFLA (the references to the wren as a character in a play not included) there are twenty-four accounts relating to Conception Bay. These can be broken down as follows: four from Avondale, one from Bacon Cove, one from Brigus, one from Carbonear, seven from Colliers, five from Conception Harbour, one from Harbour Grace, one from St Thomas and two from Torbay. There is also one other account which is of unsure provenance but from the Conception Bay area. One of my informants from Colliers also mentioned that the tradition was known in Marysvale but no further information on this was available. We are told that the tradition was *not* known in North River or Holyrood. My study is concentrating in particular on the wren boy tradition in Colliers and Conception Harbour, where the custom is still practised today.

### 5.2.1 Sample Communities

During Christmas 2002 I accompanied the wren boys of Colliers for their traditional visits on St. Stephen's Day. Their rounds covered households in both Colliers and Conception Harbour. The leader of the group was Mr. John Ryan who with Mr. William Murphy had revived the wren tradition twenty years previously. Even after the tradition had died out in Colliers William Murphy continued to visit various neighbours on St. Stephen's Day until one year John decided to accompany him and suggested they perform the wren verse too. This is what led to the eventual revival of the wren tradition in the community. Their goal in reviving the tradition was not only to maintain some of what they saw as an important part of the history and tradition of the community for the benefit of the younger people, but also

for the older people who enjoyed the wren immensely. Another not insignificant reason for the revival was that they themselves enjoyed the sociable element of the tradition as much as those they visited.

In the 1970s, at which time it was still being carried out, William Murphy had submitted a short account of the tradition on a Folklore Survey Card (FSC) to MUNFLA. This account is a description of the children's tradition which existed independently of the adults' in many communities, Colliers included. The children usually went about in the morning whereas the adults began later, and while the children sought treats or money the adults were more concerned with socialising and sharing a drink or two with the neighbours. Nowadays, the adult wren boys in Colliers pay special attention to visiting older members of the community who might be alone at Christmas and who remember the tradition from their own youth. These older people are clearly delighted when the wren boys arrive at their homes.

The version of the rhyme used by the Colliers wren boys during Christmas 2002 was similar to the version recorded by the musicians the Clancy Brothers.<sup>20</sup> One of the wren boys, however, did make a point of telling me that this was a "bastardised" version of the verse he remembered from his childhood, which was similar to most Newfoundland versions, a sample of which is given below.

### 5.3 Information from Published Sources

Very little about the wren tradition is to be found in published sources in Newfoundland. The earliest reference is in Sir Richard Bonnycastle's description of Christmas in Newfoundland in 1842. He describes the tradition in St. John's taking

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<sup>20</sup> See Appendix II for this version of the wren verse.



place on St. Stephen's Day carried out by young boys who transported the bird in a bush decorated with ribbons and papers. Bonnycastle quotes a complete version of the rhyme and attributes the origin of the wren tradition to Ireland, while presuming the mummers to have come from the West of England. The next two references to the tradition are from 1893, the first of which was an article published in the Christmas Bells annual (reprinted in McCarthy, 15-16). The author, WP, does not cite this tradition as being particular to any specific place in Newfoundland, but it is likely that he is talking about St. John's. Even though he states that the custom existed in Newfoundland it seems that the description he gives is of the custom as it was performed in Ireland. He describes the tradition as carried out by young boys in a procession going from house to house carrying the wren hung by the leg from a small bush dressed with ribbons, a mode of transporting the wren that was otherwise unknown in Newfoundland. The rhyme in this article includes the lines "And if you fill it of the small/ It will not do for our boys at all/ But if you fill it with the best/ We hope in heaven your soul will rest/ Oh Mr \_\_\_\_ is a worthy man/ And to his house we have brought our wren/ Sing holly, sing ivy, sing ivy, sing holly/ He'll give us a drop to drown melancholy," which do not appear in any other Newfoundland verse although they are similar to the verse recited by the character of the wren in the Salvage mummers' play: "The wren, the wren the king of all birds/ St. Stephen's day I was caught in the firs/ Although I am little my honor is great/ Rise up, Skipper, and give us a treat/ If you got no rum give us some cake/ If you fills the plate of the small/ It will not agree with those boys at all/ But if you fills it of the best/ We hope in Heaven your soul will rest" (Halpert and Story, 207). In the third line of WP's verse "family" – which is common in Irish tradition – is used instead of "honour". WP states

that “The custom has reached to our day (1893) and our place (Newfoundland)” (McCarthy, 16) whereas in an article published in the Journal of American Folklore in the same year, Reverend Waghorne speaks of it in the past: “it used to be the custom on the 26<sup>th</sup> December. . .for boys to go round from house to house” (Waghorne, 143). According to Waghorne’s account the boys would carry with them a small tree decorated with ribbons etc. and with a small stuffed bird on top. After reciting the rhyme they would receive a couple of pence.

In the Daily News of 1896 an article on the banning of mummering in Harbour Grace gives a description of a somewhat degenerated version of the wren tradition, where young boys went out with the wren, calling from door to door, but didn’t recite the verse:

Two squads of enterprising youngsters who still cling to old Christmas customs were out with the wren on Saturday in the extreme western part of the city. They had their trees gaily decorated with ribbons and tissue paper, and went around calling at the doors, demanding toll. The only thing lacking was the song or carol about the wren that used to be sung some 30 years ago (4).

John MacLay Bymes’ The Paths to Yesterday was published in 1931 but his memories of the wren boys are probably also from the late 1800s. He remembers the wren boys in St. John’s and describes how these boys came dressed in “grotesque costumes” carrying a tree decorated with ribbons. There is no mention of an actual wren or any kind of representation and these wren boys would gather under the window and sing. Very few accounts refer to disguise of any kind and there is no mention of costume in G.J. Bond’s entry on “Old Christmas Customs” in J.R. Smallwood’s The Book of Newfoundland in 1937. There is again a description of the tradition in St. John’s, performed by young boys carrying a small tree decorated with ribbons and possibly a bird on top. At each door they would seek permission to recite,

asking “Will ye have de wran?” and it appears to have been a morning tradition. Pennies were given to the boys as a reward.

In a short reference from The Telegram of 1962 the wren boys and the mummers are described as “two of the most exciting and colourful customs of Christmas past” and an entry in the Dictionary of Newfoundland English for “wren beer” quotes a 1969 source: “In at least one predominantly Irish community a special brew called ‘Wren beer’ is made for the St. Stephen’s Day custom of Hunting the Wren, when a bush with a bird tied to the top is carried from door to door” (Story, Kirwin and Widdowson, 620). In Caroline Carver’s 1975 publication Canadian Christmas Book: A Handset from our Victorian Past there is also reference to the “strange ritual” of the wren. This account, which is more similar to descriptions of the Welsh tradition, describes a dead robin being carried on an imitation funeral bier and is not paralleled in any other Newfoundland description.

The next references to the tradition are in the late 1980s or early 1990s. Sharon Cull’s 1988 thesis, An Ethnographic Study of Joe Batt’s Arm, describes the wren tradition, “a different type of mumming” (Cull, 74), as it existed in this community. Reference to the moonshine and rum offered the wren boys indicates that it was an adult tradition in this place and an interesting element of the tradition here is that the lady of the house would tie a piece of ribbon to the bird after the wren boys had performed. This is an aspect of the tradition otherwise found only in Boyd’s Cove.

Lawrence O’Toole from Renew’s left his home community in 1980 and returned in the late ‘80s, by which time the wren tradition had died off. He remembered the custom from his youth when boys would take a bird decoration and go from house to house reciting the rhyme for the lady of the house. It appears from

his description that this was an individual custom, "each boy took a bird ornament. . .he recited a rhyme," although at the end of the account he says "After burying the wren many times over, we came home with our pockets bulging with pennies" (O'Toole, 32). The fact that he mentions burying the wren is also worthy of comment as in Irish tradition the money was solicited on the pretext of giving the wren a proper burial. Also in the Southern Shore area, an undated extract included in Frank Galgay and Michael McCarthy's collection of Christmas holiday stories, A Christmas Box, describes the wren tradition: "The 26<sup>th</sup> of December was an enjoyable experience for the 'young fellers.' They'd go around to all the houses and riddle off the poem of the 'Wren'" (Galgay and McCarthy, 34). This version also contains the extra lines: "If you haven't got a penny, a copper will do/ If you haven't got a copper, then God bless you," a couplet which is commonly used by a range of other Christmas "begging" visitors elsewhere, and which is also included in the wren verse quoted by John O'Mara in the 1994 "Old Fashioned Christmas Album." O'Mara cites no provenance for his account but mentions the tradition as having being carried out by the boys of the community and, similar to John MacLay Byrne's account, these boys were dressed in "grotesque costumes." They would go from door to door carrying a small tree decorated with ribbons or tissue paper with a small bird ornament within and they expected a treat after they had recited their verse.

William Fagan's family and local history (published 2000) describes the wren tradition in the St. Mary's area. In many Newfoundland communities it seems that the Christmas visiting season really began on St. Stephen's Day, the day on which the wren was performed. Fagan's memories of the tradition in St. Mary's are of children

going from door to door carrying decorated trees and reciting the wren verse for money or treats.

Lastly, an undated account from The Telegram, possibly from the 1960s, describes the overlap between the wren tradition and that of “hunger out.” The “hunger out” ceremony involved baking bread slowly over a couple of days until it was very hard and then:

On St. Stephen's night, a crowd of *munmers*, picked especially for the hunger out, would go visiting. Once inside a home they would take a bun of the bread and pelt it at the walls and doors [although?] very careful not to damage anything until that bun of bread was completely broken. When it was broken into bits and pieces, the 'hunger out' crowd sang the song of the wren.

After this was completed they received hospitality from the lady of the house and then passed a hat around to collect money for “the poor little wren.” This account is very similar to that given in a 1965 interview deposited in MUNFLA regarding the tradition in St. Vincent's. In this instance those who performed the wren song also carried out the “hunger out” ceremony. Originally this may have been a New Year's custom and is described as such by Philip Hiscock in his article “More than Mummery: The Folklore of Newfoundland Christmas” which links it to an Irish custom (Hiscock, 10). Thomas Crofton Croker comments on this tradition in Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century, performed on New Year's Eve. “On the last night of each year, a cake is thrown against the outside door of each house by the head of each family, which ceremony is said to keep out hunger during the ensuing one” (Croker, 233).

#### 5.4 The Wren Verse in Newfoundland

Of all the versions of the verse gathered in Newfoundland, the lack of diversity

in the lines is quite remarkable. The usual verse goes as follows:

- (1) The wren, the wren, the king of all birds,
- (2) On St. Stephen's Day was caught in the furze,
- (3) Although he is little, his honour is great,
- (4) So rise up landlady and give us a treat,
- (5) Up with the kettle and down with the pan,
- (6) And give us a penny to bury the wren.
- (7) A pocketful of money and a cellarful of beer
- (8) We wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

When sung or recited, "treat" in line four is often pronounced "trate" to rhyme with "great," and "wren" is frequently pronounced "wran," often leading to misunderstanding with regards to the meaning. In fact, the wren itself is not very common in Newfoundland<sup>21</sup> so it is not surprising that the word is often corrupted. In many versions the word "furze" has been substituted, most often for "firs" but sometimes for forest or some "nonsense" word. This substitution would seem understandable given the absence of the furze bush in Newfoundland and it is more remarkable that the word "furze" does remain in some versions, twenty-two in all. In Irish tradition, despite the reference to furze in the verse, it was more common for the wren to be carried in a holly bush (Lucas, 184) whereas in Newfoundland tradition the wren was usually attached to the top of a stick, carried on a branch or in a small fir tree.

#### 5.4.1 A Pocketful of Money and a Cellarful of Beer

Overall I have compiled sixty-four versions of the wren verse from the various sources (these figures do not include those versions where only the first two lines are provided). Of note is that the last rhyming couplet of the Newfoundland wren verse –

<sup>21</sup> "The winter wren. . . is the only wren regularly reported in Newfoundland. . . . In Newfoundland it is rarely reported in winter and it is not common even in summer" (Smallwood, 637-8).

“A pocketful of money and a cellarful of beer/We wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year” – is not characteristic of the wren verse in Ireland although it is found in forty-four of the sixty-four Newfoundland versions compiled, including three out of four of the nineteenth century/early twentieth century verses. This couplet was recited as part of the wren verse in Newfoundland as early as 1842 (Bonnycastle), but it is impossible to determine whether the verse was introduced to Newfoundland in this form, or whether the couplet was a later addition. In Colliers the verse is known with *and* without these lines and one of my informants who doesn’t include this line in his recitation pointed out that the metre of this couplet is not the same as that of the rest of the rhyme. This may indicate that it was not part of the original verse. In Irish tradition these lines are frequently heard as part of a verse in the mummers’ play in the north, and they are also included in a few versions of the rhyme from Munster (Muller, 144). These same lines also occur in the verses of the wassailers in England “We wish you a merry Christmas/ And a happy New Year/ A pocket full of money/ And a cellar full of beer/ Pray, ma’am, give me a Christmas Box” (Jones-Baker, 178) and in other similar traditions like the celebration of the New Year in Warwickshire where an 1875 account tells us “On New Year’s morning. . . no peace or rest is to be procured after twelve o’clock, till the dawn of day. Bands of noisy urchins knock at your door, and shout: ‘I wish you a merry Christmas and a happy New Year/ A pocket full of money and a cellar full of beer/ A good fat pig to serve you all the year/Open the door and let the New Year in/Open the door and let me in’” (Palmer, R., 154). The similarities between these various visiting customs will be further dealt with in the last chapter.

Almost without exception the wren verse is directed at the lady of the house with the line “rise up landlady” or something very similar. Unlike in the majority of Irish versions of the rhyme, the third line in all of the compiled Newfoundland versions, when it occurs, talks of the “honour” of the wren as opposed to the “family”: “Although he is little, his honour is great.” Only in MacLay Byrnes’ printed account from his youth is “family” used in the place of “honour” in a Newfoundland version. The wren is also most often referred to as a male. In only six verses is the wren referred to as “she,” two versions talk in the first person, a Colliers and a Renewes version refer to “it,” and “we” is used in two accounts from Portugal Cove South and St. Thomas. A single version from St. John’s version uses “you.”

## 5.5 The Group

### 5.5.1 Group Composition

Generally the children and adult wren boys acted independently of one another. In Colliers, for example:

There were two distinct groups because in the morning it would be little kids, boys and girls would go around and they’d come in and eh, either recite or sing the wren song and of course you had to give them a couple of pennies. And. . .by noon time they’d have all these pennies collected and they’d immediately dash off and wait for the store to open the next day so that they could spend their pennies. But then in the afternoon of course the, eh, the older men would start to come around to the houses and visit house after house and either recite or sing the wren song and they’d get a drink and then they might do some other songs or tell a story or a joke, or just have fun and spread some cheer y’know? (John Ryan, 18 May, 2003).

Whereas the adult groups would enter the house and entertain the hosts and encourage the hosts to sing or play themselves, the children usually would not spend much time at each house. They were more concerned with visiting as many houses as possible to make the most out of the day. This was particularly true of those communities where



the tradition finished at noon – an element of the tradition which is mentioned in six accounts only, four of these from *Renews*. On the other hand, adults were expected to entertain; thus they usually spent some time in each house they visited. Sometimes they may have sung or recited their verse both on entry and when leaving (Q67-269). In one account from *Renews* each member of the group recited the verse in turn (Q67-611), while in Boyd's Cove various members of the group had different lines to recite (72-59; Q67-842). The Boyd's Cove descriptions – “they stand outside the floor and so many enter with each verse of the rhyme” (72-59/21) – seem somewhat similar to that of the performance of the mummer's play where the captain of the mummers might call the various characters in from the outside.

The wren boy tradition, as the title indicates, seems to have originated as a male tradition although at the time that many of the MUNFLA accounts were collected females could, and did, participate. For example, Michele Hamilton's 1989 paper from *Renews* indicates that girls in *Renews* were involved in the tradition and her own mother performed the wren in her youth. According to her ninety-three year old grandfather however, “It wasn't thought proper” for the girls to be part of the tradition in his time (Hamilton, 10). Indeed, the earliest Newfoundland accounts all specify that it was young boys who participated in the tradition and there is no mention of females or adults. It is difficult to determine whether it was originally an adult or children's tradition, but study of the older Irish tradition might be of assistance in attempting to determine this. The title “wren boys” might be somewhat misleading as in Ireland “boy” referred to an unmarried man, no matter what age he might be.

Of the sixty-seven MUNFLA accounts, the tradition as performed by both adults and children in the community is mentioned in only three accounts. Men only are cited in nine accounts, children only in thirty-three, specifically boys in eleven of these, and usually or probably boys in three. Generally people went around in groups although one *Renews* account describes the tradition as carried out by a lone person (Q67-336), as does another from Avondale (Q67-571). In Torbay it was one child accompanied by an older child or an adult who performed the wren (Q67-883). Only in Boyd's Cove, Notre Dame Bay, was it consistently an adult tradition.

#### 5.5.2 Costume and Disguise

Newfoundland wren boys, unlike the mummers or the wren boys in Ireland, generally make little or no attempt to disguise their identities. Apart from the couple of references to "grotesque costumes" in the published accounts (Byrnes; O'Mara), overall it seems as if disguise was not an important part of the Newfoundland tradition and the earliest sources make no mention of any kind of costuming. Amongst the accounts which do refer to disguise, one from Conception Harbour describes a man dressed up as a bird (Q67-878), and in Brigus the leader of the procession may have had feathers on his coat (Q67-395). Both a *Renews* and a *Carbonear* version describe the wren boys as being dressed in a style similar to the mummers or janneys (Q67-336, Q67-412). Often no clear distinction was made between the two, as in an account describing the wren boys in Cape Broyle: "Formerly mummers wore much more colourful outfits, these consisted of brightly coloured cloths with many ribbons hanging from the shoulders and waist" (Q67-870). Ribbons were also in common use by the wren boys in Ireland – both as part of a disguise and as a means of decorating

the wren bush. There are also descriptions of another kind of Christmas visitor, “ribbon fools,” from Flatrock near St. John’s.<sup>22</sup>

A report from Avondale in Conception Bay describes a parade of between two hundred and three hundred wren boys on St. Stephen’s day in the late 1800s “dressed up in strange disguises as oilskins, boiler-maker’s overalls, women’s shawls and clothes of all colours” (71-42/23), and a Colliers version suggests that the children might sometimes have been in costume (Q67-1132). Leo Donahue from Boyd’s Cove says that participants would “Put on the best you got – dress right up, oh yes, and you’d dress up the same as you were goin’ to a, a Liberal Ball in St. John’s. The best clothes you got. . . . Your Sunday’s best” (65-017/C200). One account from the Conception Bay area notes that although costume was worn, there were no facial disguises. Most of the MUNFLA accounts don’t mention disguise at all, and there are six accounts that state definitively that no costume was worn. A disguise used in Conception Harbour in living memory, however, was a type of straw costume. One of my informants who is sixty-one years old participated in the wren tradition herself until she was about fifteen. In preparation for visiting on St. Stephen’s Day costumes from hay were made during the Christmas period. The girls would wear straw skirts and the boys would wear straw conical hats, although these were *not* made to cover the face. Hay at that time was readily available as most families kept horses and there was more small-scale farming practised than today. Despite the use of costume in this instance, it still appears that disguise was not essential. Another lady in her 80s and

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<sup>22</sup> “In Flat Rock they had what were called the ‘ribbon fools.’ As Mrs. G tells it ‘These were adults, mostly men, dressed in costumes made of all sorts of ribbon. People, the women I s’pose, would collect these scraps over time, they were the only things that the outfits were made out of. Both the ribbon fools and the other mummers would go from house to house, visiting old friends and having a great time all around’” (91-440/34).

also from Conception Harbour remembers that the wren boys of her childhood made hats out of straw and hay. At that time they called them “straw-men” although they were essentially the same as the wren boys. There would appear to be a direct link with the Irish tradition where straw costume was often used by the wren boys “The leader is dressed up in a covering of straw tied around him, and has his face blacked. He carried a big staff to which the wren is tied” (O’Sullivan, 85-6). Nowadays the wren tradition in Ireland is still very strong in Dingle, County Kerry, where straw costume is frequently worn by the participants. It may be of significance that the area around Dingle was the largest centre of emigration to Newfoundland after the southeast (Mannion, “Tracing”, 10). Straw costume was also used by other seasonal visitors such as the mummers, strawboys and biddy boys.<sup>23</sup>

## 5.6 Hunting the Wren

In Ireland prior to the wren boys’ house visit on St. Stephen’s Day, there was a “hunt” to find and kill a wren. As already mentioned the money the wren boys solicited was raised in the name of giving the wren a proper funeral, hence the line: “A penny or tuppence to bury the wren.” Some of the early Irish literary accounts condemn the cruelty of this practice, and indeed c.1845, as a result of this perceived cruelty, the Mayor of Cork issued an order to ban the practice. This element of the tradition does not seem to have survived in Newfoundland however, one of the contributing factors perhaps being the fact that the bird is not common in the province. Nevertheless, there is reference made to hunting a bird in Boyd’s Cove and all four accounts from here mention the use of a real bird for the visit: “I forgot to tell you

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<sup>23</sup> See Gailey, Alan “Straw Costume in Irish Folk Customs” for more information.

this, we'd go kill a bull bird, and uh, sometimes it wudn't be possible to get one, but most falls I'd kill one if I see it's goin' to get stormy, a month ahead, and put it in the fridge and freeze it" (65-17/C200). It was more common for the wren boys to carry some sort of homemade model of a bird on the end of a stick, or a cardboard cut-out on a stick or perhaps simply a couple of feathers stuck to a stick. Often it is difficult to ascertain whether or not a real bird was being used, although in some accounts it is quite clear: "they may have a stick with red paper around it, and ruffles on the top which represented the bird's feathers" (Q67-766, Conception Bay area). It was probably more common for a representation of a bird to be used, although it appears that a real bird was used in the earlier sources of Bonnycastle and Waghome where they describe "a small stuffed bird." In Irish tradition the wren hunt was justified by various legends of the wren's treacherous nature but the fact that these legends do not appear to have transferred to Newfoundland might explain why the hunt was not a large part of the tradition here. There are just two references to any kind of legend in Newfoundland: the legend of the wren as king of all birds is mentioned in an account from Renews (Hamilton, 7) and in an account from Bacon Cove the motivation for the tradition is told as follows: "Folk legend reports that a wren. . .flew into the forge of a stone-mason one morning killing itself. Thus on the feast-day of the patron saint of stone-masons, honour is made to St. Stephen and homage is paid to the wren who died a tragic death" (82-198/37).

### **5.7 Carrying the Wren**

Although the earliest Newfoundland accounts describe the wren being carried in a small bush or tree it appears to have been more common for the bird to be carried

on a stick as the table below illustrates (Table 5.2). This stick may have been decorated with “festive colours” (82-198/37) or painted in some way (71-42/71) and the bits of trees or bushes were often decorated with ribbons or coloured paper. In Boyd’s Cove it was traditional for the lady of the house to add a ribbon to the tree – also true of the tradition in Joe Batt’s Arm – and clearly this was a well-treasured custom as Leo Donahue describes how “there’s girls here belonged to Boyd’s Cove now married out in – uh – California, and they uh, most every year up to this last two years, they sends home presents to go on the wren, and they’re married in California. Sends back ribbon or something to put on the tree” (65-17/C200).

Some accounts include more than one description of what the wren boys carried with them. There are seventy references in all to a bird/bush representation carried by the wren boys and these break down as follows:

Table 5.2:



An interesting account from St. John's shows how the wren itself eventually lost its significance to the custom: "On St. Stephen's day a group would get the top of a tree, fasten what they called a 'Ran' to it made of different ornaments from the tree and go from house to house" (Q67-1039). A couple of the archival accounts mention how, with the passing of time, the relevance of the bird and perhaps its relation to the rhyme were lost, when people simply took any ornament off the Christmas tree and carried this with them from house to house while reciting the rhymes. In *Renews* for example:

Today however, only a Christmas tree ornament is used. In fact, this year, I even saw two small boys using a tiny red bell (Christmas 1966). I suppose the reason is that the bird used was usually taken off the Christmas tree for that day and since the same ornaments are used every year, when the bird ornaments were gone, children just took any other thing that could be found, not realising the practice calls for a bird in a branch (Q67-611).

This also calls to mind the already quoted account from Harbour Grace in 1896 where the boys still went from house to house carrying a tree and collecting pennies, but without any wren. The confusion surrounding the word "wren" or "wran" may have led people to discard this part of the tradition and continue only with what were seen as the more important components, i.e. the perambulation from door to door and the collections. Dr. Philip Hiscock of the Folklore Department at MUN made the suggestion that the tradition of children in St. John's visiting various houses over the Christmas period asking to have a look at the Christmas tree in the hope of receiving some treats from the hosts might also be a degeneration of the wren custom. Of course this might also be just another of the many varied Christmas house-visits, some of which will be discussed in the final chapter.

### 5.8 Rewards

In Ireland, usually both the mummers and the wren boys, children and adults alike, sought money from those houses they visited. However, in Newfoundland money would only ever be offered to children whereas adults could expect “Christmas cheer” – usually a drink and maybe some cake or food. The earliest published accounts of the wren boy tradition in Newfoundland describe the tradition as practised by children and how they would collect money from their hosts “In St. John’s. . .it used to be the custom on the 26<sup>th</sup> December. . .for boys to go round from house to house, carrying a small spruce or fir bush, like a miniature Christmas tree. . . . The following lines are then repeated, for which the boys expect a few halfpence” (Waghorne, 143). Of the sixty-seven MUNFLA accounts of the tradition, twenty-four state that money was collected after the wren performance. In all but three of these accounts, it is clear that it was children only who collected the money. Children did not always receive money and they might instead have been given candies, Christmas cake, cookies or syrup. Only one account, from St. John’s, states that money was *never* given as a treat even though young boys were involved (Q67-732). A Conception Harbour account of the children’s tradition tells us that the pennies were kept for a party or a communal celebration. This also occurred in Irish tradition where after the Christmas season it was common for mummers and wren boys to put on a dance with the proceeds of their collections. The reward received by the adults was usually a drink, and maybe some cake, although in one case it seems that food may have been collected and put towards a “spree” at the end of the day (Q67-268). An interesting description of the tradition from Harbour Grace relates that the wren boys themselves brought gifts to the house, and in return they were given treats: “In my



father's day. . . . on St. Stephen's day, they went around to the houses and they brought gifts on St. Stephen's day and they expected to get a treat in return" (FSC 72-245/C1389). When I was in Colliers, the children that preceded us that morning had been collecting money whereas the adults' group instead received drinks, and occasionally food. For the most part, ritual visits in Newfoundland were made for the purpose of sharing rather than taking away, a reflection of the economic conditions of most outports. In early Newfoundland society there was no cash economy as the fishermen worked under the "truck" system which was a non-cash operation of credit and debit between merchant and fisherman, thus cash would not have been readily available amongst the "lower classes."<sup>24</sup> Louis Anspach in his 1819 history of Newfoundland comments on this when he notes "Christmas boxes are expected [during/after the house-visit]. . . . presents, not in coin, for this is not in common use there, but in eatables" (Anspach, 477). Although some of the larger outports may have had a resident merchant or two, generally there was not much of an "upper class" to be visited and any attempt to collect money during ritual visits to an ordinary fishing family would be somewhat futile. Instead, the wren boy visit seemed like more of a social event, and another excuse for a good time at Christmas!

### 5.8.1 Luck

Unlike the wren tradition in Ireland, very little mention is made in the Newfoundland descriptions of the "luck" element of the visit, or the bad luck that

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<sup>24</sup> Chris Brookes explains the truck system: "Under this system, each fisherman went to a merchant in the spring and obtained fishing gear, food and supplies on credit for the coming fishing season. At the end of the season the fisherman returned to the merchant with his catch to settle his account. . . . the price of fish, as well as the price of provisions, was set entirely by the merchants. . . . in 1841 an estimated three out of every four Newfoundland fishermen were in debt to their supplying merchant" (Brookes, 24).

might befall those who didn't welcome the wren boys. However, there are a couple of references to the notion of good or bad luck. For example in *Renews* "the first boys at a house were thought to bring luck to the household for the coming new year" (Hamilton, 10) and for this reason they were the most likely to get the most money. In Bacon Cove, Conception Bay, "If the verse was recited and no penny was paid, bad luck was cast upon the person, who could expect some calamity to occur. The young boy didn't cast the spell, rather the act of not paying homage to the wren was sufficient to warrant ill fortunes" (82-198/39).

### 5.9 Parading

In earlier days in Newfoundland it appears that the Mummers' Parade was an important part of the tradition (descriptions in Bond, Bonnycastle and Whittle), and Herbert Halpert suggests that "Most Newfoundland accounts of the behaviour of mummers on their way to perform the play (as distinct from the house-visit) suggest that there was rather formalised marching under the direction of the Captain of the Play, or a similar figure" (Halpert and Story, 51). The wren boys in Ireland often travelled in a type of parade from house to house and there are some suggestions of a similar phenomenon in Newfoundland. In Avondale, Conception Bay the contributor cites a group of two hundred to three hundred men parading through the community on St. Stephen's day:

They marched from the north side of Avondale to the railway station and back. There was little snow on this particular day, and they sang and danced, playing violins, tin-whistles, accordions and whatever they could secure. The thing seems to have been well planned, and when they got to the Long Bridge they had a dance. There was much noise, rowdiness and fun (71-42/71-72).

In the other three accounts from Avondale however, there is no mention of this. I asked John Ryan in Colliers had he ever heard of it, or of anything similar in Colliers and his response was: "I did hear about, they actually had parades of wren boys. It was, it was sort of, not an official parade as such, but, eh, they would parade through the community and then they would start to visit houses y'know." In his opinion it was performed to prepare people for the impending arrival of the wren boys at their doors. The same phenomenon also occurred in Cape Broyle:

The last time it was performed was in 1884. It has often been mentioned during Christmas since, but the parade itself has never been performed. When it was performed it took place on St. Stephen's day. Usually a group of men took part. They would march through the settlement and visit as many houses as they were able. One person led the parade carrying a stuffed figure to represent the wren (Q67-876/11).

Even in places where there was no big parade, there appears to have been some degree of formality associated with the movement of the wren boys. Sometimes a specific leader was appointed who led his group in a kind of procession or march. For example, in Boyd's Cove. "And then we keep goin' from house to house. You get. . . someone among the boys, I'd nearly always be in charge. . . . We had a real parade. . . . You must be in line. Before we get right there to the house I'll say, line up boys, and everyone go in line" (65-17/C200). Children in Renews marched back and forth inside the home as they recited the verse for their hosts "The child marches into a kitchen with a little homemade, or ornament bird from the Christmas tree and declares 'I want to say the wren for you.' After getting automatic permission, he marches back and forth across the floor clutching the 'bird' in his extended fist and reciting" (FSC 73-47/14). Only two accounts state that there was no kind of procession at all (Q67-766; Q67-228).

The Orangeman's parade – which celebrates the victory of the Protestant King William of Orange over the Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 – traditionally takes place in Ireland on the Twelfth of July, but in Newfoundland it is commemorated on the 26<sup>th</sup> of December. A description from Cupids describes the tradition:

One of the most colourful events was the Orangemen's parade on 'Boxing Day.' Most of the Protestant men took part and the boys followed behind. The leader was mounted on a white horse and was followed by the men on foot, each playing his instruments. The huge drum provided the marching time and was strapped on the back of the man ahead of the drummer. As the parade marched along, some people would fire their old sealing guns (71-130A/7-8).

Although five percent of Irish immigrants to Newfoundland were Anglicans, Roman Catholicism was virtually synonymous with the Irish in the province. In the early days of settlement there was much tension between Irish Catholics and English Protestants and the sectarian murder in 1861 of Protestant Isaac Mercer of Bay Roberts by Catholics dressed as mummers is just one indication of the divisions and animosity that existed between the religions in Newfoundland. It is possible that these religious groups may have used the parades as statements of ethnicity and moving the Orangemen's parade to St. Stephen's Day might have been a response to the activities of the Irish Catholics on this day.<sup>25</sup> Alternatively, it is possible that fishing activities during the summer did not allow for a proper commemoration on the Twelfth of July. Thus it was more suitable to move this celebration to a time of year when most people

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<sup>25</sup> It was not unusual for tradition to be used as a cover for subversive activities. Beginning in the early 1700s the secret societies of the Whiteboys in Ireland became active. These groups were founded in response to the land injustices and in an attempt to mete out rough justice to those who supported the system of exorbitant rents, evictions and terrible conditions of Irish tenants (Kee, 24-26). Ruairi Ó Caomhánach points out that there were similarities in disguise between the wren boys and the Whiteboys and that Whiteboy activity often took place at "seasonal festivals." He also notes that folk drama may often have been "aligned with a particular type of politics associated with rural insurgency" (Ó Caomhánach, <<http://www.mustard.org.uk/articles/drama.htm>>).

would be free from work. Interestingly there is a link made in Protestant tradition between the wren tradition and the Lambeg drum which is usually used during the Twelfth of July celebrations. The legend of the wren betraying the Irish soldiers, which will be discussed some more in Chapter Seven, tells of his alerting King William's forces to the imminent attack of the Jacobites by pecking at the crumbs on a drum, thus waking the sleeping army. The beating of the Lambeg drum is thus seen to represent "the pecking beak of the bird" (Bell, 19) which saved the Protestant soldiers.

### 5.10 Conclusion

Overall the wren tradition in Newfoundland resembles the Irish tradition quite closely. The most significant difference between the two is that the collection of money was not the objective of the adult wren boys in Newfoundland as it was in Ireland. The most likely reason for this is the different economic climate in Newfoundland, an explanation of which has been given above. In my opinion, the most intriguing difference in the traditions is the existence of the additional rhyming couplet in Newfoundland versions of the wren rhyme. The references Sylvie Muller has to this couplet in Irish tradition are all from the province of Munster (Muller, 144), the area of Ireland that provided most of the immigrants to Newfoundland. It is possible that these lines may have been a part of the Munster wren tradition and from here travelled to Newfoundland. It is also likely that the lines were borrowed from another tradition as it has been seen that they were used by mummers and wassailers amongst others.

For many not only is the wren tradition an important social activity at Christmas time, but it is also significant for its connection to the past, and to a certain

degree to the Irish heritage of the community. John Ryan of Colliers commented on this "They sort of felt that it was an Irish tradition, but all they knew was that it was what they were accustomed to. It was handed down from one generation to the next." The tradition as practised in the province in verse and in action is amazingly similar to that in Ireland, and Newfoundland may be unique outside of Europe in having such a strong and long-standing wren tradition.

## 6. The Wren in Colliers

### 6.1 Introduction

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 2002 I had the good fortune to accompany the wren boys of Colliers, Conception Bay, Newfoundland (Figure 6.3) as they went on their annual St. Stephen's Day rounds. I had spent Christmas in Holyrood, a community about twenty minutes drive from Colliers, and on St. Stephen's Day morning I drove to the house of John Ryan – unofficial leader of the Colliers' wren boys – to meet



**Figure 6.3:** Colliers, Conception Bay

and join the group. The weather that St. Stephen's Day morning was wild but neither that nor the after-effects of the previous night's Christmas celebrations were enough to prevent the "boys" going "out on the wren."

## 6.2 Starting Out

John and his wife Anita live on “the Ridge” in Colliers which is on the main road through Conception Bay North. John and Anita traditionally host a crowd of neighbours in their home on Christmas Day night and when I arrived at their home at about eleven on St. Stephen’s Day morning two of the partygoers were still there and just emerging from bed. I was warmly welcomed and sat down at the kitchen table where I had a cup of tea while the others gradually got organised. I had never met either John or Anita before but received the best of receptions from them, as I did in every house we visited where I was introduced as “the girl from Ireland.” I did feel that being an Irish student researching in a community with a strong Irish background such as Colliers was quite an advantage. People were curious to meet an Irish person in Newfoundland and were exceptionally welcoming and friendly.

Shortly after my arrival at the Ryans’, two more of the wren boys – Jim Coombes and John Murphy – made an appearance. At this point it was discovered that no one had any kind of wren or even anything that would pass as a wren so a call was made across the road to William Murphy, John Murphy’s brother. He produced a Christmas decoration in the form of a bird that had been used in previous years and which, despite looking somewhat the worse for wear, could nonetheless serve their purpose again. John Ryan taped the bedraggled bird to the top of a stick with duct tape, donned a green jester-style hat that Anita had bought him for the occasion and we were ready (Figure 6.4). It was now past noon and the gathered group at this stage comprised John Ryan, John Murphy, Jim Coombes, Trevor Rowe and myself. A short walk thorough the blowing snow brought us to our first stop – William Murphy’s house. This house is traditionally where the wren boys’ journey begins and later ends



with a “time.” We went into the house shaking the snow from our clothes and taking off our boots before entering the kitchen where a number of the Murphy clan awaited us in anticipation. I stood with the wren boys while, led by John Ryan, they recited



**Figure 6.4:** John Ryan

the wren rhyme for what was to be the first of many times that day. After being offered a drink by the lady of the house we stayed and chatted for a short while before moving on. At this stage William Murphy, his daughter Naomi, her husband Rick and their friend André Richard all joined with us. For the most part, the “core” group every year is John Ryan, Trevor, Willie, and Jim, and the rest of the group will change from year to year. John’s wife Anita has participated on occasion but the day can be a

long and tiring one and so she doesn't do it every year. As John himself pointed out "The girls had better sense"!

### 6.3 The Visits

The next house we visited was that of Trevor's parents-in-law. His wife and children were there too and the mood in the house was festive as the three generations applauded the spectacle of the wren boys. At this juncture I was given a "Santa" hat to wear to further enter into the spirit of things. Even this early into our visiting I was struck by the great reception we received everywhere we went. There were drinks immediately on offer when we arrived and they were never refused, although they wouldn't be accepted until the wren boys had done their duty and performed the verse.

Our next stop was across the way at a former pub where once again we were accorded a big welcome. After this visit we cut down the hill through knee-deep snow to the home of a couple called Doug and Gay (Figure 6.5). This was their first Christmas in their new home and the significance of the wren tradition in the community was evident when Doug insisted on videotaping the performance. He said that having the wren boys visit their new home for the first time was "an historic occasion." After the recitation, Doug played us a recording of the Clancy Brothers' version of the wren song, which is roughly what the Colliers wren boys use today. Then when the wren boys sat down for a drink and a chat Doug played us a couple of tunes on his accordion. Gay shared her memories of twenty-five years previously when she herself used to go out with the wren. She told us how they would all be delighted at the pennies they managed to collect on their rounds, riches to them at that time.



**Figure 6.5:** Performing the wren in Doug and Gay's house

After visiting a couple of other homes, one of which was Jim Coombes' own (we called on the families of all the participants where possible), we arrived at the house which was the traditional "pit-stop" of the wren boys. Although it was hard to believe, it was about four o'clock by now and definitely time for a bite to eat! After performing our piece (at this stage I had picked up enough of the rhyme to be able to sing along) the lady of the house fed us lovely hot turkey soup. The soup did a great job in countering both the cold and the effects of the afternoon's drinks which were beginning to take effect. Although it seemed be expected that all of the group would partake of alcoholic drinks in the houses visited, I did not as I had to drive back to Holyrood later that evening. This pit-stop is one of two that are part of the wren boys' annual routine; traditionally they are fed here in the middle of the day and elsewhere at the end of their rounds. While some of us were eating, Naomi and her father performed a couple of songs (Figure 6.6). Then the son of the house, a wonderful guitarist, arrived and performed a few tunes that everyone sang along to. From here,

we lost two of the group for a short while when both Jim and John Murphy headed away for a bit of a break.

### **6.3.1 Visiting in Conception Harbour**

After leaving this house, John Ryan insisted that it was time we headed over to Conception Harbour, the next community south of Colliers. Today the distance between where one district ends and the other begins is insignificant. John knew a couple of people over there whom he had promised to visit and whom he didn't want to let down as they always looked forward to the wren boys' visit. The wren tradition did exist at one time in Conception Harbour, but seems to have died out. Departing from "true" tradition, we took advantage at this time of André Richard's father's services, and he chauffeured us over to Conception Harbour where, incidentally, André's mother comes from. Our first stop there was the home of Wilf Doyle, the famous Newfoundland accordion player. When we arrived at the house, he and his wife were watching an American soap on TV, but there was a tray of drinks on the table in anticipation of our visit. Both of them appeared delighted at the wren boys' visit but Wilf was especially thrilled at the opportunity to play us a couple of tunes. He joked that as it was so long since he'd played he could hardly remember where he'd left his accordion and it was probably just shoved under the bed somewhere. In many cases the hosts were not only pleased to have visitors and delighted at the entertainment they offered, but the fact that it gave them a chance to perform to an audience of sorts appears to have been an important factor in their enjoyment of the tradition. Before he began to play, Wilf asked Naomi to accompany him on the piano and when we left the house about forty minutes later, Naomi commented on how

thrilled she was to have been able to play along with the great Wilf Doyle. This was the highlight of the day for her.



**Figure 6.6:** Willie and Naomi provide the entertainment

Our next port of call was the home of a ninety-one year old man, Peter Fitzgerald-Prior, a Scot by birth who had spent some of his childhood in Ireland. It was past six o'clock by the time we made it to his house. When we did arrive Peter commented how he had been prepared to be disappointed as he thought that we weren't coming because it was getting late. He said it had "made his night" to see have the wren boys call. After the rhyming had been done, and we were all seated with drinks, Peter was asked to give a tune on his harmonica. Similar to the situation in Wilf Doyle's house, Peter mentioned how the wren boys' visit the previous year

was probably the last time he'd had the chance to play for anyone. He had to send one of the youngsters in the house looking for his harmonica, which was eventually located buried in a drawer. Our spell in Conception Harbour continued with a visit which was much lower key, followed by a stop at André's family home. Although his family now live in Gander, his mother is from Conception Harbour and they come back to the house whenever they have holidays. Their house had been a shop until the 1970s, and the main room still had the shop fittings and some of the old tins, weighing machines and other shop paraphernalia in it. André's mother was an O'Driscoll, the family having originally come from Ireland. The familial connection with Ireland was clear in the presence of a map of O'Driscoll territory in county Cork on the wall.

### **6.3.2 Memories of the Wren**

After leaving the O'Driscoll home we headed back into Colliers and Mr. Richard dropped us off "down the harbour." We entered the next house through the basement which was set up as a rec. room – giant TV, bar and all. Performance was delayed for a couple of minutes while the mother made sure her daughter came down as neither of them had seen the wren performed before. Continuing on from here we walked along the harbour road where I chatted with Naomi and her father about their respective memories of growing up in Colliers. Willie talked a little of the wren as it existed when he was young and he made a point of telling me that the verse that they used nowadays was completely different to that which he remembered from his youth. It seems that when the tradition was revived in Colliers, they adopted the Clancy brothers' version from the commercial recording rather than using the verse that was in folk memory.

When talking about their wren experiences, Naomi and her father remembered in particular two elderly brothers, since dead, that they used to visit down by the harbour. The Captain and the Skipper were seemingly great characters and the wren boys would call on them every year. They looked forward to the wren boys' visit and would have the drinks waiting for when they arrived. One incident Naomi recalled was when the wren boys were in the house and the ninety-one year old brother turned to his eighty-nine year old sibling and said "Hey, young fella, do you want a drink?" This was only one of many fond memories they had of their wren-visits of other years.

### **6.3.3 The Last Round of Visits**

In the next house we visited there was an old man, who was quite deaf, living with his son. It so happened that when we arrived at this house a documentary by Peter Blow about mummering in Ireland and Newfoundland was being aired on the television. This household appeared not to receive many visitors during the year thus the extra visitors that the Christmas season brought were probably of particular significance. The old man wanted the wren boys to sing him Irish songs, so Willie sang him "Kevin Barry." One of the comments he made about his old age was that he wanted the doctor to give him steroids to make it easier for him to stand up: "Sure it helped Ben Johnson!" he said, alluding to the Canadian sprinter disgraced for drug use in the 1988 Olympics.

The next house the group had intended visiting was not far from here, but from the road we could see that the house was in darkness so it was decided not to call. On a later trip to Colliers I met the middle-aged bachelor whose house it was and he

commented on how disappointed he had been at having no visit from the wren boys that Christmas.

We stopped quite a while at the next house we visited. Generally each visit lasted at least twenty minutes but it was coming near the end of the day, around eight o'clock in the evening, and the pace was slowing a little. Our host, Gerard, sang us a couple of Hank Williams songs, and then Naomi gave a lovely rendition of Buddy Wasisname's song, "Saltwater Joys," which enthralled the room for that few minutes. From here we moved on to the last few houses which were close by and close together. In the first of these Billy, the owner, was watching a Led Zeppelin concert on TV, quite a contrast to the "concert" put on by the wren boys! In the next household, the younger people had their friends out from town visiting for the day. The lady of the house said to us "Come in and do your thing for these townies who've never seen the like!" While we were talking after this particular performance the subject of mummering, or janneying as it is called in Colliers, came up. One of the household said that janneying wasn't, and never had been, very common in the area. The hero-combat play tradition, however, was undergoing something of a revival as Trevor told me that the children in the local school where he taught would put on the play at Christmas time.

#### **6.4 The Janneys**

It was nine o'clock by the time we reached the next house which was the second "pit-stop" and the last house to be visited for the day before the crowd headed back to Willie Murphy's for their traditional "time." We were sitting down having some turkey soup and I was beside John Murphy – he and Jim Coombes having



rejoined us at this stage – sitting on the outside of the table, just inside the door, when next thing we knew in burst the janneys with “The Mummers’ Song” blaring from their stereo. Within seconds the kitchen was a riot with music blasting, everyone singing along and bodies everywhere (Figure 6.7). I was pulled up to dance and transferred from mummer to mummer until finally the song ended and we were allowed to rest. Every year in Colliers it is the same couple that do the janneying: Doug and Gay whom we had visited earlier. However, when they are in costume and accompanied by others it is almost impossible to distinguish who is who. As it happened on this night Gay’s sister, whom no one knew to be home from Toronto, was with them and that was a surprise to all. There were also comments after the unmasking, which happened shortly after the music finished, of “I knew that was Doug because. . .” There was no ceremony about a guessing game as there often seems to have been with mummers in other places. After the janneys unmasked, they had a bite to eat and left and peace reigned once more. They said that they had lots more places to visit, even though it was quite late in the evening by now. Their next stop was where Gay’s nephew was staying as, having grown up in Toronto, he had never seen the janneys.

Although both the janneys and the wren boys visit in Colliers, they generally have quite different routes and the fact that the janneys travel by car means that they can cover more ground than the wren boys. They also seem to stay a shorter time in each house and, apart from their mummering performance, don’t provide entertainment in the same way that the wren boys do.



**Figure 6.7:** The janneys arrive

At this stage of the evening, after being out since half eleven that morning and having visited at least sixteen houses, I was exhausted and decided that it was time to return to Holyrood. When I announced my intentions I was besieged by offers of beds to stay in and told that if I left then I would be missing the “time” which was the best part of the evening. Once again I was struck, and delighted, by the natural hospitality and friendliness of this crowd whom I had met for the first time that day. However, I pleaded exhaustion and after exchanges of numbers and email addresses I left the wren boys to their time. I returned to Holyrood to write up my notes and collapse into bed after a tiring, but extremely entertaining and enlightening evening!

## 6.5 Conclusion

James Faris says visiting at Christmas (in its many forms) was a way of “affirming a set of social bonds” (Faris, *Cat Harbour*, 191). Truly this notion is true of the wren boys’ activities in Colliers, which are primarily motivated by social reasons.

The visits are based on hospitality and friendship and consciously attempt to include in a community activity those who might at other times be alone or somewhat isolated “They would try to visit them because it was, it was more important to, to sort of bring Christmas to them, y’know? Because they knew they couldn’t get out all that much” (John Ryan).

In my own experience the wren boys were accorded an exceptional welcome wherever they went, and I found the friendly rapport between neighbours to be one of the most striking things about the day. Even in the quieter houses, the wren boys lifted the mood for the duration of their visit and it was obvious that their presence was appreciated by all: young or old, single or married. There was also great camaraderie within the group and lots of joking around. John Ryan later told me that there is something of an unofficial “fool” in the group at whom most of the jokes are aimed, and he generally holds this privileged position! Whether or not the origins of the tradition lie in an ancient winter ritual associated with fertility and good luck, today the tradition in Colliers is about socialising, spreading Christmas cheer and also preserving a part of the Christmases of the past.

## 7. The Wren Tradition in Ireland

### 7.1 Introduction

In 1957, in the Irish folklore journal *Béalóideas*, Caoimhín Ó Danachair published an article on distribution patterns in Irish folklife. His map of the wren tradition illustrated that, apart from in the north of the country, the custom was widespread across Ireland.<sup>26</sup> Over a hundred years earlier in 1849 James Orchard Halliwell stated that the wren tradition “has been so frequently described, that it is not necessary to do more than allude to it,” giving us some notion of just how extensive and well-known the tradition must have been in Ireland at one time (Halliwell, 165). Nowadays the tradition is much less common but has not completely died out. As well as children in rural parishes still going out on the wren, there are a few relatively “high profile” events across the country relating to the tradition. In Dingle, county Kerry, the wren parade on St. Stephen’s Day is a huge occasion which has developed from an unbroken tradition of the wren in that area (MacDonogh, 9). In Listowel, also in county Kerry, an All-Ireland Wren competition co-founded by the writer John B. Keane over forty years ago, takes place in September and people travel from all over Ireland to compete. Since being introduced (or possibly re-introduced) to the prosperous Dublin suburb of Sandymount, the wren has become part of a daylong festival every St. Stephen’s Day for the last twenty years (Figure 7.8). A feature of both the Dingle and the Sandymount wren is that the money collected on the day is donated to charity.

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<sup>26</sup> Ó Danachair’s map is inaccurate in that it shows no evidence at all for the wren tradition in the north. However, the tradition was known there even though it was not as prominent as in the rest of the island.

My intention in this chapter is to provide a snapshot of the wren tradition as it was in Ireland. Most of the information derives from the manuscript collection in the Department of Irish Folklore, as well as from various printed sources. As the Newfoundland wren tradition originated in Ireland, it will be interesting to compare the two traditions and reveal the close relationship between them.



**Figure 7.8:** The Wren in Sandymount, St. Stephen's Day 2003.

## 7.2 The Group

### 7.2.1 Adults vs. Children

It is almost impossible to ascertain whether the wren tradition was originally a children's or an adult tradition. The general, often erroneous, assumption in cases such as this is that traditions move "down" as in Alan Dundes' discussion of "devolutionary" theory: "The most common devolutionary notion is that folklore decays through time. Another notion is that folklore 'runs down' by moving from 'higher' to 'lower' strata of

society” (Dundes, 6). This is usually assumed to be true of the wren tradition, with a movement over time from a “higher” adult tradition to become the premise of the “lower” youth. For example, W.W. Gill in A Second Manx Scrapbook comments on the Manx tradition “in the days before the Wren-rites were delegated to children” implying an older adult tradition (Gill, 415). In Ireland most of the archival accounts from the Department of Irish Folklore relating to the wren tradition were collected in the 1940s and ‘50s at which time it appears that the custom was mostly the remit of children or teenagers. Accounts of adults’ involvement are referred to in the past: “‘Hunting the wren’ as I have described it has died out in this district but a more juvenile form of it has persisted among the children” (IFC 1090: 437).<sup>27</sup> The adult tradition had not died out completely however, and a number of sources describe both young boys and men participating. In Newfoundland, where the tradition is somewhat “younger” than in Ireland, the earliest sources all refer to young boys carrying out the tradition and it is possible that it was introduced to the province as a children’s custom.

In Ireland, as in Newfoundland, the groups of adults and children remained separate: “Youngsters of six to sixteen used to be in the small groups of wren boys, but in the big wrens they had then, men were aged from twenty to fifty, even older” (IFC 1391: 137). Children usually visited during the day whereas the adults went out at night time:

Wren-boys still go round the district on St. Stephen’s day. Early in the day the children of school-going age, both boys and girls, go around while the young men go around in bands at night. . . . In former times only boys under fourteen went with the wren (IFC 1090: 171-2).

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<sup>27</sup> IFC denotes a manuscript from the Irish Folklore Collection housed in the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin.

Of note in this short quote is that the children's tradition is identified as the older one by the informant.

An account from Dublin describes the differences between the old and the young groups:

On the same day senior bands of wren boys also operated. These were composed of young men in their twenties and while the junior groups confined their attentions to the houses of Tallaght village and its immediate environs, the senior groups chiefly visited the outlying farmsteads where they usually got a larger donation than that given to the children. . . . The takings were spent on drink in the evening. Moreover the senior bands paid their visits later in the day than the juniors. . . . They carried a bush and wren and recited the rhyme just like the juniors but in addition they were equipped with musical instruments (IFC 1090: 164).

Providing entertainment seems to have been expected of the older wren groups, and in this way they would have "earned" their reward. Children however would usually only recite the verse and move on. This meant that their visits were much shorter than those of the adults. In the wren in east county Clare today for example, the children have no interest in entering the house and their priority is to say their piece, receive a reward and move quickly on to the next house.

The earliest known description of the wren visiting tradition is that of Charles Vallency in a 1786 publication Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicis, quoted in a 1929 article by D.J. O' Sullivan and in which, significantly, the tradition does not seem specific to any group or sex:

He is still hunted and killed by the peasants on Christmas Day and on the following (St. Stephen's Day) he is carried about, hung by the leg, in the centre of two hoops, crossing each other at right angles, and a procession made in every village of men, women, and children, singing an Irish catch, importing him to be the king of all birds (Vallency in O'Sullivan, 84).

This account also notes that the song sung by the wren boys was in Irish. According to O'Sullivan there are only three recorded instances of the verse in Irish (O'Sullivan, 86) and although there are additional verses in Irish to be found in the IFC collection, these are negligible in comparison to the number in English. Even though the absence of verses in Irish might seem to indicate an origin in the English language, Vallery's account is significant for its early reference to the Irish verse and might refute this notion.

### 7.2.2 Males vs. Females

Even though there are accounts of both males and females participating in the wren tradition, in most of the earliest accounts it is clear that these customs were restricted to males. Where there was female participation in later days, it was usually amongst the younger age groups although, as always, there are exceptions to this: "The youngsters go in bands of their own, boys and girls together, and even in the grown up wren boys there be girls as well. In some places the women take part as well as the men" (IFC 1480: 113). In some cases where both sexes participated, they did so in separate groups. There may otherwise have been female representations amongst the wren boys, even when females did not participate. One account from county Carlow notes the presence of a "Queen" character who accompanies the wren boys and "who helps in the singing and dancing" (IFC 1090: 410). Also accompanying the wren boys on occasion was a female character called the *óinseach* who was usually a male dressed as a female. *Óinseach* is the Irish word for a female fool, and she often accompanies the male fool figure who is a regular in the wren troupe. These fools were not specific to Irish wren tradition however as the older mummers' play in Wexford tradition often featured the



fool figures of "Darby and Judy," as did the English sword-dance plays (Gailey, *Irish Folk Drama*, 70). Alan Gailey also notes the presence of the male and female fool in the plays of north Dublin and west Ulster (Gailey, *Irish Folk Drama*, 100). The Mari Lwyd in Glamorgan Wales was accompanied by Punch and Judy amongst other characters (Owen, 51) and descriptions of the Christmas parades from nineteenth century Newfoundland also allude to an *óinseach* character among the Fools taking part in the Christmas parade: "The Fools were one of the great Christmas institutions in the city. . . . Joined with these gaily bedecked Fools were a smaller number of veiled men in women's garments. They bore the appellation of Oonchooks" (Bond, 259).

The presence of specific characters such as the fools has been interpreted as indicating the existence of an earlier more complex tradition. It is worth quoting the correspondence from "P.L." to the Times Literary Supplement in 1934 which voices the common theory on this subject amongst scholars of the time:

In my childhood, nearly seventy years ago, among the 'Wren-Boy' Mummers in Ireland one performer sustained the part of fool and another, in female attire, acted as oonshuch (she-fool), and during the performances this pair kept conferring on each other mock amatory attentions. This feature seems significant, as the Wren-Boy celebration seems to be a degraded survival of a midwinter sun-worship and fertility cult.

It has been suggested that the wren boys' visiting tradition as we know it from these late nineteenth century/early twentieth century accounts was a degeneration of a more elaborate tradition, possibly some type of folk drama: "There seems good reason to believe, that the simple procession of children with the wren, to collect money, is only a survival of a far more elaborate performance, possible a *ludus* very similar to the mummers' play" (Green, E., 11).

Detailed accounts of the activities of the wren boys in county Kerry around the turn of the nineteenth century are quoted to support this notion “two long accounts. . .of the St. Stephen’s Day celebration at Dingle, county Kerry. . .afford some ground for believing that the wren ceremony, before it became degenerate, was made the occasion of a sort of rustic mummers’ play” (O’Sullivan, 87). Some IFC accounts also contain evidence of specific roles amongst the wren boys: “There are usually some definite characters in the groups: Tom Fool who carried a staff and a pig’s bladder” (IFC 1090: 411).<sup>28</sup> However, it is only natural that different calendar customs are influenced by, and borrow from, various other similar customs. In particular we know of the overlaps between the mummers and the wren boys, where the Wren often appears as a character in the mummers’ play, and sometimes some of the mummers’ rhymes are included in the wren verse “Money we want and money we crave/If you don’t give us money we will sweep you to the grave” (McGarry, 162). The appearance of “Tom Fool” in the account above is also indicative of borrowing from the mumming tradition. It may not be that the wren boys’ tradition degenerated over time, but rather that these apparent “clues” to a more complex tradition are simply borrowings from other similar traditions, in particular that of the mummers.

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<sup>28</sup> The bladder on a stick - the “standard equipment of the fool” (Gailey, 83) – was often carried by members of the wren troupe: “Some members of the band carried bladders which were inflated, tied with cords to long rods and used in a boisterous way in striking each other”. This behaviour was not intended to be aggressive however, as the informant continues “They were a noisy good-humoured crowd and created much amusement” (IFC 1090: 187). The Newfoundland Fools and Oonchooks also carried inflated bladders with which they “thrashed” the crowd (Bond, 259).

### 7.2.3 Size of Groups and Group Rivalry

Group size for the wren boys varied from as few as two or three people to as many as forty. Most communities would have had more than one group of wren boys and this would inevitably have led to rivalry between groups, although rough encounters are not often mentioned. Occasionally if they encountered one another on their rounds, a scuffle would break out and one group might try to rob money from the other. A description from 1889 recounts "When two parties of wren boys from different parishes come into collision there is frequently a contest for possession of the wren" (Mooney, 418). Some bands were prepared for this however: "In case of an attack by rival bands one member. . . carried a tin box with a few pence. If they were attacked he rattled his box and drew the pursuit, while the real treasurer escaped" (IFC 1090: 173). On the other hand the different groups of wren boys may have tipped one another off about the houses with the best reception: "The wren-boys take different routes when starting out in the morning but towards evening bands of them meet and discuss the day's adventures such as the places where they got the best reception" (IFC 1090: 376). Certain bands might also attempt to outdo their counterparts in their dancing and musical skill (IFC 1090: 345).

### 7.2.4 Leader

Many groups had some sort of leader or captain with them: "Almost every group has its captain, with sword, sash and plumed hat. In some districts a king and queen in tinsel crowns are the leaders of the party. In others there are jesters with belled cap and pig's bladder on a stick" (Danaher, "King of All Birds," 28). Another of the group may have been assigned the role of "banker" to collect the money. "The man or men who kept

the 'Tokens' (money collected) were known as 'Bankers' and they divided it in shares in some pub, after all the sport was over" (IFC 1391: 137). On occasion this role was assigned to the youngest member of the group (IFC 1090:184) or sometimes the person who was leading the group was also the treasurer or the spokesman.

An interesting account from Kilkenny tells us of a king-like figure leading the Wren Boys:

*Fadó téigheadh sluagh fear óg ó thig go tig bhíodh 'Rí' aca ag marcúigheacht ar chapall agus an 'dreóilin' aige sin i gcraoibh cuileann bhíodh suas le triocadh nó dachad sa bhuidhean. . . . Thosnuigh an sgata le gleó agus ceól, an 'Rí' ar an gcapall agus an dream a' thionlachan téigidis ó thig mór mar a mbiódh fáilte rompa agus sport agus rinne (IFC 1090: 420-421).<sup>29</sup>*

The presence of a leader along with references to the wren boys' outdoor activities as processions would seem to suggest that there was a degree of formality associated with the movement of the wren boys from house to house (Figure 7.9). The parade of wren boys in Dingle today which is central to the tradition would appear to be directly related to these processions of the past.

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<sup>29</sup> Translation: Long ago, a group of young men would go from house to house and they would have a 'King' with them riding on a horse and the wren with him in a holly branch. There would have been thirty or forty in the group. . . . The crowd started with noise and music, the 'King' on the horse and the crowd accompanying him they would go to big houses where there would be a welcome for them and fun and dancing.



**Figure 7.9:** Wren procession outside house. Athea, Co. Limerick. (Kevin Danaher, 1947. Courtesy of the Head of the Department of Irish Folklore)

### 7.3 Disguise

#### 7.3.1 Cross-Dressing

Besides playing the female companion to the fool, a man participating in the wren tradition would commonly dress as a woman: “On arrival at a house they struck up a tune, two people danced (one was dressed as a woman) and when the man of the house came out they started the rhyme” (IFC 1090:232). Notwithstanding the fact that this would have been an obvious enough choice of costume for men when few other resources were available, Natalie Zemon Davis, in her article “Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe,” notes the common theme of sexual inversion in various traditions and in “literature, in art, and in festivity. Sometimes

the reversal involved dressing and masking as a member of the opposite sex" (Davis, 152). Even though women were not frequent participants in the tradition, they may also have indulged in cross-dressing: "There would be young lassies, with gossuns trousers on them and gossuns with lassies dresses on them" (IFC 1480: 41). Men dressing as women was a common disguise in many aspects of folk tradition and was also a cover for rioting and public protest, used by the Whiteboy protesters in Ireland for example:

In Ireland, where old stories told of the ritual killing of the King at Samhain by men dressed as animals and as women and where funeral wakes involved fertility rites with women dressed as men, we have the most extensive example of disturbances led by men disguised as women. For about a decade, from 1760 to 1770, the Whiteboys, dressed in long white frocks and with blackened faces, set themselves up as an armed popular justice for the poor 'to restore the ancient commons and redress other grievances.' They tore down enclosures, punished landowners who raised the rents, forced masters to release unwilling apprentices, and fought the gouging tithe-farmers mercilessly (Davis 180-1).

Davis proposes that cross-dressing may have been indulged in as part of a fertility rite and Alan Gailey echoes this theory when he draws attention to "the importance of the male and female fools suggesting one of the couples and generations of the life-cycle drama" (Gailey, *Irish Folk Drama*, 83). However, E.P. Thompson takes a more practical view on the subject when he comments on Davis' work in his book Customs in Common. He points out that "a woman's gown was the most readily available garment to disguise a collier or a cottager. Some of the upside-down symbolic effects. . .were consequence rather than intention" (Thompson, 332).

### 7.3.2 Costumes and Facial Disguise

From the information in the Irish sources it appears that there was often an attempt by the wren boys at complete disguise, as in this Longford account "every kind of auld

clothes. . . and their faces covered, the way they wouldn't be known" (IFC 1480: 112-113). One account goes so far as to say "Masks are nearly always worn and if not the face is always hidden. The people whom they visit despise any whose faces can be recognised" (IFC 1090: 201). Alan Gailey comments on the use of disguise by strawboys and notes that "if the performers were recognised the good luck they brought with them was automatically broken" (Gailey, *Irish Folk Drama*, 71). This theory might also extend to the wren boys' use of disguise as they too were associated with luck-bringing.

Descriptions of the Irish wren boys' disguise resemble quite closely Newfoundland descriptions of the mummers, and indeed folk costuming world-wide. Men dressed as women, clothes were turned inside out, faces were blackened and occasionally some sort of animal costume, e.g. horns or animal skins, was worn. Ribbons were often used as a part of the wren boys' disguise and also, as in Newfoundland, to decorate the wren bush.

When masks were not used for the purpose of facial disguise faces may have been blackened with burnt corks or soot. Irish wren boys used straw in their costumes, a tradition which for various practical reasons did not transfer very well to Newfoundland. The straw costume usually consisted of a straw conical hat and perhaps a skirt-like garment, or one to cover the torso (Figure 7.10):

The usual form of dress used by the wren boys was straw tied around the legs to disguise the trousers worn, and a belt of straw tied round the middle of the body, straw round their faces called 'waugles'. The waugles were brought up round the head, tied at the back and into a queer shape on top of the head (IFC 1405: 289).



**Figure 7.10:** Straw costume, Dingle wren boy.  
(© Steve MacDonogh)

Alan Gailey has this to say about the use of straw in costuming:

Use of a material like straw in this way must have a deeper significance. . . . Once again there is the suggestion of encouraging nature at a 'dead' time of the year, by dressing up in fresh straw from the harvest so recently saved (Gailey, *Irish Folk Drama*, 74).

Gailey's statement is in keeping with the Frazerian school of thought which would regard this Christmas rite, amongst others, as a means of encouraging fertility at a time of little growth. On the other hand, it must be remembered that straw would have been a convenient and suitable material for disguise especially considering the high proportion



of Irish households that would have been involved in agriculture on some scale. Straw costumes were also worn by the biddy-boys on St. Bridget's Eve and strawboys at weddings and wakes as well as by the Christmas mummers.

Even though the common use of masks and face-blackening would seem to imply that the wren boys wished to remain unknown, this was not always the case, "They dressed in straw helmets, some wore masks but there was very little attempt at disguise" (IFC 1090: 188); "dressed up in all kinds of old clothes and with blinds over their faces. . . . There seems to have been no great efforts at disguise" (IFC 1090: 678-9). It is likely that the importance of disguise lessened to a certain degree over time: "Nowadays no disguises or special dress is worn, though paper caps from crackers may be used. . . . older bands disguised themselves, blackening their faces, wearing their coats inside out or donning some sort of fancy dress" (IFC 1090: 163-4). Kevin Danaher's series of photos, housed in the photographic collection of the Department of Irish Folklore, show the wren boys of Athea, county Limerick, in the late 1940s with blackened faces and wearing old clothes and different kinds of headgear, but with no facial coverings (Figure 7.11). Photographs of the older men show them dressed in a military fashion with sashes across their chests and plumed hats on their heads but again with no masks or facial covering.

In some cases only some of the group may have disguised themselves, as in the following account: "I saw groups of anything from ten to thirty men, two or three of the number would be disguised and would come into the houses rich and poor alike" (IFC 1405: 289).



**Figure 7.11:** Young boys dressed for the wren  
(Kevin Danaher, 1947. Courtesy of the Head of the  
Department of Irish Folklore)

#### 7.4 Transporting the Wren

The wren was usually carried in a holly bush which would be decorated with ribbons or pieces of paper. On some occasions the wren may have been carried in a box as in this account from county Laois:

The wren is carried around now in a box with two long sticks fastened at each side like a hand-barrow. The box is ornamented with coloured papers and the ‘wren’ sits in state in the middle of the box surrounded with moss, holly and Christmas decorations. . . . Sometimes there is a flag floating on the top (IFC 1090: 375).

Otherwise the wren boys may have carried both a bush and a box in which to collect the money. If they had a live wren with them, he was released at the end of the day (IFC 1088:23). Sometimes all they carried was a couple of feathers to represent the wren (IFC 1399: 678) or there may have been no representation of the wren at all: “They carried a

holly bush decorated with coloured papers. They don't carry a wren at all and they don't kill a wren" (IFC 1090: 390). Similar to Newfoundland tradition, the wren might also have been carried on the end of a stick:

The children. . . . carry a piece of stick about four feet long dressed in ivy or holly. They were provided with a mock wren fastened to the stick. . . . Present day children carry a stick 3' to 4' long, 2" in diameter dressed in holly or ivy leaves and coloured ribbons. The 'wren' was an improvised affair and was attached to the stick by a piece of cord (IFC 1090: 387).

It was possible that more than one wren may have been carried around "Attached to a huge holly-bush, elevated on a pole, the bodies of several little wrens are borne about. This bush is an object of admiration in proportion to the number of dependent birds and is carried through the streets in procession" (Hall, 23); "the various companies gather at their respective headquarters with the bodies of the slaughtered wrens, the more the better" (Mooney, 417). Vallery's description from 1786 describes the bird as hung by the leg from the centre of two crossing hoops, which is similar to the most common mode used to carry the wren in the Isle of Man (Vallery in O'Sullivan, 84).

### **7.5 Route Taken and People Visited**

Only occasionally did the wren boys have a set route as in this county Louth account: "The route to be taken was planned beforehand – some distance from home where they would not be recognised. People specially visited were the priest, the parson and the gentry" (IFC 1090: 172). This account appears to support the notion of maintaining anonymity throughout the visit, although distance from home as opposed to costume is cited here as a means of remaining unrecognised. It seems probable that the usual practice for the wren boys was to visit within their own communities, as it is

unlikely that the hosts would have been satisfied to give strangers food, drink and/or money when they arrived unannounced at their doorstep. It was frowned upon if people visited the areas of other wren groups (also called wrens) “Then they started going from Kilrush into outside towns and villages for the wren, and the places they went to, they were not received, as they had wrens of their own, and they disliked strangers coming in to collect wren money there” (IFC 1391: 138). A contributor from county Cavan suggests that this was an urban tradition rather than a rural one and states “The towns are mostly visited, houses in the country being too far apart” (IFC 1090: 227) and this idea is supported by Seán MacGiollamaith in his article on the Irish wren tradition in The Newfoundland Quarterly.

Many accounts emphasise that the wren boys visited every house in the parish or as many houses in the community as possible. There was often a conscious effort to include everyone in the community “The wren boys’ routine consisted of visiting every house, enemies or not, and going in a circle. . . if there is no answer to the slogan a loud knock is sounded on the door” (IFC 1090: 351). Special attention was of course paid to visiting those houses where a good reception was expected: “They went to the village of Coolgreaney on foot – visited every house they thought they would get money or food or drink” (IFC 1090: 453) and an account from county Clare mentions how they would not bother to visit the poorer houses as they knew there wouldn’t be much in it for them (IFC 1088: 12). It is very likely that they concentrated on the wealthier houses for these were where the return was best “the ‘wren boys’. . . generally confine their visits to the houses of the wealthier farmers and the gentry” (Mooney, 418). Another account from the Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking) area of Kilkenny mentions that only *an tighthe Gaedhealach*

(Irish houses) as opposed to those of the *seóiníni*, or Anglo-Irish, were visited (IFC 1090: 421).

There was little denominational discrimination as the following account illustrates: “The wren boys used to collect from every house, rich and poor, and the priest’s house as well as the minister’s house used to be visited” (IFC 1391: 138). Similar to the practice of the ritual house visitors in Newfoundland, those houses where someone was sick or where there had been a recent death were generally not visited. Also mentioned as those which were avoided were those households who had someone “touched” (IFC 1090: 213), or the houses of “old maids and bachelors” and this may have been because the wren boys would not expect a lot of entertainment or “craic” in these houses. The wren boys may have made a special effort to visit the houses of the newly married which is also mentioned in relation to the wren tradition in Wales. This may also be indicative of an overlap with the tradition of strawboys visiting weddings to bring good luck to the newly-weds.

Unlike Newfoundland MUNFLA sources, none of the IFC accounts that I have seen mention a noon deadline for the completion of the wren boys’ rounds. There is one reference to this element of this tradition in *Béaloidéas* (Roe, 29) but the account notes that it was no longer a part of the tradition at that time. Generally groups started in the morning in an attempt to get to the houses earlier than their rivals and thus get the best of what was on offer but they would carry on until late evening. Groups made up of young boys (and possibly girls) would finish before nightfall whereas older groups might go around after dark (IFC 1089: 7).

## 7.6 Entertainment

Many of the accounts relating to the adult wren tradition in Ireland describe the entertainment they provided over and above reciting the wren verse. There was usually a couple of musicians amongst the group, carrying fiddles, accordions and bodhráns. To entertain, the wren boys would play, dance or sing for their hosts and perhaps for this reason they were usually well received by people: "The one great sport that used to be was the wren boys. Dressed up in all sorts of clothes, sacks and things, and they going around, singing, dancing and doing tricks" (IFC 1391: 136). In some cases they might not have entered the house at all for the performance, but performed outside, or alternatively a couple of them may have entered to recite the verse and collect money. This must surely be true of those bigger groups made up of as many forty men, an impossible number to fit in anyone's kitchen.

In later days the collection of money may have become more important than the provision of entertainment for the hosts. This perceived change in the motives of the wren boys meant that they were not as welcome in many households as in earlier years "the system has changed for the worse. . . .nowadays is just another form of begging" (IFC 1088: 12). That the wren boys were aware of this negative view of their tradition is evidenced in an addition to their rhyme "Come now mistress, shake your feathers/Don't you think that we are beggars/ We are the boys that came here to play/So give us our money and let us go away" (Howe, 232). It was not only the wren boys who were accused of participating in an activity which was perceived as merely a glorified form of begging; one of Ian Russell's informants noted about the Derby Tup tradition in England that "It's

counted as begging if you don't do it right" (Russell, 441). There was clearly a thin line between the two, and I will discuss this further in Chapter Eight.

In some places where the recitation part of the tradition was lost over time the crowd would still dress up and visit from house to house looking for a treat, "They never went lookin' for the wran in my time, but they went lookin' for money to bury the wran, and no wran with them at all" (IFC 1480: 112); "They don't hunt the Wran now at all. They first go around dressed up, with a box for collectin' money, and then divide the money among them at the end of the day" (IFC 1458: 534). As we have seen, this is also true of the Newfoundland tradition where the visits still continued even when the significance of the wren had been lost. In some places where the practice had died out, the verse still remained in folk memory without context.

## **7.7 Response to the Wren Boys**

### **7.7.1 Reception**

With few exceptions it seems that the arrival of the wren boys was welcomed. However, the welcome wore thin if too many groups came around, each of them looking for treats: "The attitudes of householders in general was kindly and generous except where too many groups appeared" (IFC 1090: 213). A generous reward was forthcoming for the first arrivals as they were believed to bring luck to the household for the following year. This meant that there was usually competition amongst groups to reach a house first and this was not popular with many householders "the houses in the town are being knocked up from 8am whilst most people want a rest after Christmas day. They make themselves unpopular in this way" (IFC 1090: 227). Perceived cruelty to the harmless

wren may have led others to turn them away “Not infrequently he or they were refused money on account of their cruelty in killing a poor harmless bird. Those who refused them money, however, had to see that the wren boys did no mischief or harm when leaving the place” (IFC 1090: 223). In most cases however, the wren boys were an eagerly anticipated part of the Christmas celebrations, and people were disappointed if they did not call: “As no work was done anywhere during ‘the twelve days of Christmas’ the ‘wren boys’ were welcomed everywhere. They enlivened the day in every area” (IFC 1090: 439). In some cases, to ensure that the wren boys had done something to earn a treat and were not simply scrounging off the household, “The oldest member of the household examined the box with the wren to assure themselves that ‘the boys’ had been out ‘hunting.’ The money was then given and also something to eat winding up with a bit of pudding” (IFC 1090: 437).

Not only did it mean good luck for the household if the wren boys were treated well but a refusal to contribute could have negative consequences. Some of the verses of the wren include a less than subtle threat in “I pray you good lady to give us a treat/ If the treat is the best in heaven your soul will rest/ But if the treat is the small/ It won’t agree with the wren boys at all” (IFC 1088:15). Having the wren buried at the door would bring bad luck upon the household (IFC 1430: 124), or the wren boys might otherwise punish their hosts by playing tricks on them, perhaps taking a chicken from the yard or some cake from the sideboard in the kitchen (IFC 1430: 124). An overlap with the mumming tradition is evident in a rhyme from Cavan with a similar theme of exhorting a reward “really the wren boys some twenty years ago took possession of the kitchen – each went through his rhyme – and then came ‘Miss Funny with her long purse to carry



the money' money we want and money we crave, and if we don't get money we'll sweep you all to the grave' and with this threat the shilling or half crown was forthcoming" (IFC 1090: 226). Another threatened bad luck with the verse: "Put your hand in your pocket and take out your purse/Give me a penny or you'll have the wren's curse"(1090: 237). Although the wren boys generally didn't misbehave, it appears that their popularity was diminishing as the performance part of the tradition was disappearing and one account says that by this time (c.1947) "there is not as much welcome for them as heretofore. They are now considered a nuisance" (IFC 1090: 345).

### 7.7.2 Rewards

Evidence from the many accounts of the wren tradition in Ireland indicates that unlike in Newfoundland, the main reward received by the wren boys on their rounds was money. This money was usually collected in the name of paying for the wren's funeral. It is interesting to note, however, that one account says that in earlier times food was given over money: "In the good old days when food was plentiful, it was the custom in each house to put aside a large barm brack or a home-made currant cake to distribute to the wren boys but now they get money" (IFC 1090: 379). Another informant remembered that long ago when the wren boys came round they were given porter, not money (IFC 1429: 203). Sometimes the visitors were given food or porter to put towards a "spree" – a party or a time. An interesting account from Longford tells how the youngsters used to be given a "grain of tay" (tea) as this was a rare treat at the time, but when they got older they wanted money, with which they bought a barrel of porter at the end of the day (IFC 1399: 678-679). Another account from Longford also specifies tea as a treat particular to

days such as Christmas Eve, St. Stephen's day and St. Patrick's day (IFC 147:120). According to one account no "subscriptions" were sought in those houses where the wren boys were "sumptuously entertained" (IFC 1090: 202-3).

At the end of the day the money collected was usually divided up equally between the members of the group, although according to one contributor the money was divided "according to the person's status in the place" (IFC 1089: 9). Otherwise the day's takings were put towards a "spree." If this was the case, the money could be given to the publican "and they would then drink the whole day's 'bag' as twas called" (IFC 1391:138), or spent on putting on a dance in the community. Generally the children taking part would receive some treats from the householders or a couple of pennies to spend on sweets.

### 7.8 Legends of the Wren

There are a number of tales and legends surrounding the wren and the reasons for his persecution. Where a real bird was used by the wren boys in Ireland, a hunting ceremony usually took place on Christmas day or early on St. Stephen's day morning. The earliest written reference to hunting the wren dates back to Charles Smith's State of the County and City of Cork in 1750: "as the wren makes but short flights, and when driven from the hedges is easily run down, to hunt and kill him is an ancient custom of the Irish on St. Stephen's day" (Smith in O'Sullivan, 84). The boys would hunt the wren in the ditches and hedges and attempt to kill him through stoning or by hitting him with their sticks. This was the only time of the year that a wren could be killed as it was believed to be unlucky to do so at any other time. It has been suggested that the wren was blind for one day (Mooney, 417) or for three days around this time (IFC 1090: 421),

which made it easier to capture him. The wren's blindness is regarded as part of the curse invoked as a result of his betrayal of St. Stephen, Our Lord or the Irish. The reason for his cruel treatment is explained in a couple of different legends. In one of these the wren is blamed for betraying St. Stephen who was stoned to death and, in retribution the wren is subjected to a similar fate.<sup>30</sup> Another common legend recounts how the Irish enemy (sometimes the Danes, William of Orange's forces, Cromwell's army or even the Vikings) were asleep on the hillside and their sentry failed to notice the Irish stealthily approaching the sleeping soldiers. However, a wren landed on one of the enemy's drums to peck off some crumbs, and the noise he made woke the enemies and the surprise attack was foiled.

There are also legends of the wren betraying Our Lord: "The origin of the wren boys' custom was that the wren spied on Our Lord about two thousand years ago, and ever since he is followed in order to punish him" (IFC 1088: 22). The wren was said to have lapped up the blood of Jesus on the cross and this was a further reason why he was despised. Another story told is that "the wren was the devil's bird and for every wren killed a bone was broken in the devil's body" (IFC 1090: 413).

A well-known folktale (AT 221) explains the story behind the wren as king of the birds. Below is a version of the tale as told in county Kilkenny:

The local story of the origin of the wren boy custom is as follows: There was no right argument among the birds as to which of them should be king. So they agreed to come together on St. Stephen's day and choose a king and they asked St. Colm Cille to judge between them. St. Colm Cille agreed and said that the bird

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<sup>30</sup> "The following I remember from childhood. The reason that the wren was followed and persecuted and stoned to death was because it betrayed the whereabouts of St. Stephen to the soldiers who were following him by saying. He's here! He's here! When he was hiding in a furze bush and as he was stoned to death that was the method employed to kill the wren" (IFC 1090: 364).

who would fly the highest should be the king. They all agreed and then they started to fly. They weren't far up when first one bird dropped out and then another. At last the eagle seemed the only bird left, and when he had reached his very highest the wren started up from his back, where he had been sitting unnoticed all the time, and mounted a few feet higher in the sky. Then he came down the king of all the birds. St. Colm Cille denounced him for his trickery and that is why the wren is persecuted ever since (IFC 1090: 425-6).

A less common legend is also told of the wren and his dealings with the *corr-sgreachóg* (screech owl), to whom he owed money (IFC 191:221) and how the sparrow and the fox managed to outwit him.<sup>31</sup> A version of this is also printed in MacGiollarnaith's article.

### 7.9 The Wren-Hunt

The hunting of the wren was clearly a widespread custom in the mid-1800s as it prompted the mayor of Cork to ban the cruel practice: "Richard Dowden, mayor of Cork in 1845, issued a proclamation during his mayoralty forbidding, on the score of cruelty, 'the hunting of the little bird on St. Stephen's day by all the idle fellows of the country'" ("The Wren Boys," 1894, 22). Over time, however, it seems that the importance of carrying a real wren around diminished, thus the hunt for the wren became less common.

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<sup>31</sup> [Translation:] The *corr-sgreachóg* lent some money to the wren, but the wren wouldn't pay him back. When the *corr-sgreachóg* went to collect his debt there were twelve wrens with the old one and he couldn't distinguish which was the one he wanted. He left frustrated but then he met the fox and told the fox his story. The fox then offered to try and sort out the problem. He was carrying some sheaves of wheat with him and when he arrived at the place he gave them to the wrens, and then he said '*Is maith i an sean-lámh*,' meaning something like 'More power to the old.' Of course then the senior wren answered and said 'There'll never be anyone as good as me' and so the fox was able to serve him the papers. When the wren was brought to court he wasn't able to pay his debts. When the young people of the town heard this, they told the wren that they would go from house to house collecting money for him and then the wren said that he would go with them. They managed to collect enough money to pay the *corr-sgreachóg* and it so happened that this all took place on St Stephen's day and this is why the boys always go around on now on St. Stephen's day (IFC 191: 221-222).

"Some of the wren boys carried a bush with a dead wren in a nest in the old days but in later times they don't hunt the wren or kill it as they did then" (IFC 1090: 375). If no wren was available the wren boys might substitute "some sort of bird, a sparrow or some bird like that and they'd let on it was a wren" (IFC 1480:41). Live birds were sometimes used, as in one county Clare account: "They used carry a berried holly bush which they sometimes tied ribbons and brightly coloured papers and cloths. A wren alive was usually attached to it" (IFC 1088: 23).

Although in earlier times the burial of the wren at the end of the day may have been more significant – as was the case in the Isle of Man – very little ceremony associated with the disposal of the wren or the bush is evident in any of these Irish accounts. Among the conflicting accounts about the end-of-day burial are many which claim that no ceremony whatsoever was involved whereas others state that it could be considered either lucky or unlucky to have the wren buried at the door at the end of the day: "At the end of the day the wren boys retired with the wren to the person who gave the biggest contribution and buried it in front of the door" (IFC 1090: 196); or alternatively "anyone refusing to contribute had the disgrace of having a wren buried at the house" (IFC 1090: 176). It seems to have been more common to believe that burying the wren at the door was associated with bad luck. Of the few descriptions of any kind of ceremony, a report from Dublin tells of the wren being carried in a matchbox – representing a coffin – which was buried at the end of the day, and the bush simply thrown away (IFC 1090: 163). If the bush was not thrown away it may have been burned: "In Kilrush they used either take the wren bush home with them and throw it out afterwards, or else they used to burn it bit by bit, in the open hearths of one of the town

pubs, as they sat drinking their ‘bag’” (IFC 1391: 138). In county Kildare the wren was buried at the end of the day with a penny (O Murethi, 452) and in county Carlow the bush was buried at day’s end and the wren freed (IFC 1090: 415). An account from Laois tells of the wren boys throwing the branches and the bird itself into the river. The overall lack of ceremony might have been as a result of the decline in carrying a real wren.

### 7.10 The Wren Verse

Irish versions of the wren rhyme are much more diverse than those in Newfoundland. There are usually more verses in the Irish versions, but the majority include the basic six or seven lines, with some variation:

The wren the wren the king of all birds,  
 St Stephen’s day was caught in the furze.  
 Although he is little his family is great,  
 Rise up lady and give us a treat.  
 Up with the kettle, down with the pan,  
 Give us some money to bury the wren/Give us your answer and let us be gone.

One of the most noticeable differences between the Newfoundland and Irish verses is that in most Irish versions, “family” as opposed to “honour” is used in the third line of the verse. The wren in Ireland is more often referred to as “she” than in Newfoundland. Significantly the rhyming couplet that appears at the end of the majority of the Newfoundland verses – “A pocketful of money and a cellarful of beer/We wish you a merry Christmas and a happy New Year” – is absent from most Irish verses. This couplet is however included in a verse from Waterford published in 1936 (Buck, 41) as well as in counties Clare, Tipperary and Cork (Muller, 144). In Irish tradition this couplet is much more commonly found in the mummers’ verses of the north. Although there is a

couple of lines in several wren verses that are somewhat similar: "We dipped his wings in a barrel of beer/And wished them all a Happy New Year" (IFC 1090: 345).

The Irish verses have many more additions than those found in Newfoundland. Some of the extra lines that appear most frequently in the Irish versions are the following "If the treat is the best in heaven your soul will rest/But if the treat is the small/It won't agree with the wren boys at all." Interestingly, this extra verse also appears in the wren rhyme in the text of the mummers' play from Salvage in Newfoundland. Other recurring lines are those such as "We followed the wren three miles and more, three miles and more/Tho' weary sick, sorrowful and sore" (IFC 1088: 19) and "borrowings" from the mummers can be seen in the lines "Money we want and money we crave/ Or if we don't get money we will sweep you all to the grave/ All silver and no brass" (IFC 1090: 177). A variation of a well known Christmas rhyme is introduced in several of the Irish verses "Christmas is gone and the goose is getting fat/Please put a penny in my old tall hat/If you have'nt got a penny a ha'penny will do/If you haven't got a ha'penny God bless you" (IFC 1090: 169). An account from county Laois tells us that the rhyme was added to later on the evening:

In the evening they added another piece to it 'We cracked her wings, An' we broke her pate, An' we buried her up at 'Tom Ryan's' gate'. . . it was the custom to bury the wren near the house in which they got the best reception as an honour to the inmates (IFC 1090: 376).

As we have seen, the wren verses might also include a threat to the household if the wren boys were not well received "Up with the kettle and down with the pan/Be generous with your purse, or we'll bury the wren" (IFC 1090: 242); "Put your hand in your pocket and take out your purse/Give me a penny or you'll have the wren's curse," "If you don't give

us money we'll bury her at your door" (IFC 1090: 185). These same "threats" can be heard in the verses of some of the collector characters in the mummers' plays which the wren boys have borrowed from, and vice versa.

According to Ballads from the Pubs of Ireland, "when minstrels of any kind cross the threshold of a house in Ireland it is customary that the first song or verse should be in praise of the owner" (Healy, 68) and perhaps it is in the same tradition that some versions of the rhyme include a verse or some lines dedicated to the woman or the man of the house: "Mr O'Brien is a worthy man and to his house we brought the wren" (Mooney, 419).

Many of the variants of the wren verse in Irish tradition are as a result of overlaps with other similar calendar customs. The relatively isolated nature of the Newfoundland outpost meant that there would not have been the same exposure to a wider complex of traditions as in Ireland. This probably accounts for the remarkable homogeneity of the wren verse in the province.

### **7.11 The Hobby horse**

In Dingle, county Kerry, an area where the wren tradition is still strong today, the wren boys had a unique addition to their group in the form of a hobby horse or *Láir Bhán*. The hobby horse is not common in Irish tradition, but it does sometimes appear in the Mummers' Play and also as part of a Samhain tradition in Cork and related to the Bealtaine Festival in some areas of the country (MacDonogh, 34). In Kerry having a hobby horse was an essential part of the wren tradition and much preparation was involved in fixing it up before the Christmas season.



In the past, the hoops of fish barrels. . . were used for the making of the hobby. . . . Its white lined covering was sewn onto the frame by a tailor. In general, the preparations of thirty, forty and fifty years ago were more painstaking and continued for up to three months before the Wren's day. . . . Satin was the most fancied material. . . . So complete would the rigs be, with the aim that no person should be recognisable by their neighbours, that no item of the person's everyday clothing was visible and even hands were gloved (MacDonogh, 24).

The hobby horse often appears as a type of frightening figure accompanying the Newfoundland mummers, but there is no indication that he was ever associated with the Newfoundland wren boys.

## 7.12 Conclusion

The wren tradition in Ireland was concerned with customary begging to a much greater extent than in Newfoundland and this appears to be the most significant difference between the custom in both places. As evidenced from the earliest accounts of young boys in St. John's soliciting pennies, it is likely that the tradition when first introduced to Newfoundland from Ireland was focused on money. However, this form of the tradition could not survive in the economic conditions that prevailed in most Newfoundland outports. Clearly the tradition fulfilled a need other than monetary gain for the people of Newfoundland – becoming a social event for example – and the custom would have adapted accordingly. David Cressy in Bonfires and Bells points out that “distance and detachment from the cultural sources and context in which the old-world traditions had thrived” are factors which influence cultural change (Cressy, 192), and changes in the wren tradition in a new setting where different cultural forces were at work were inevitable.

Apart from the issue of the type of hospitality sought, the other significant differences between the traditions appear to be the absence of disguise and the additional rhyming couplet in the verse in Newfoundland. In Ireland we have seen that the importance of disguise diminished over time and it is possible that this may have been the case by the time the tradition was introduced to Newfoundland. The absence of the rhyming couplet ("A pocketful of money. . . . happy New Year") in most Irish versions of the rhyme would seem to indicate that it is not part of the original verse. Although it is not possible to conclusively determine whether these lines were added before or after the verse's introduction to Newfoundland considering that these lines appear as early as 1842 in the Newfoundland references, it seems likely that the verse was introduced in this form. It is possible that the couplet was characteristic of the Munster wren tradition, as Sylvie Muller's references indicate, and this would explain how it came to feature in the Newfoundland tradition. Overall, despite these differences, the tradition in Newfoundland is still close enough in form to the Irish tradition to be immediately recognised as deriving from the same.

## 8. House-visiting Customs

### 8.1 Introduction

As I have mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, the Wren tradition forms only a small part of the large body of seasonal house-visiting customs in Ireland and Britain. These visits occur as an element of festivities at significant times of the working year, for example during the Quarter Days which mark the beginning of the seasons<sup>32</sup> or the mid-winter festival of Christmas. While Estyn Evans notes that the visits associated with these festivities have an important social content, "Having little opportunity for regular social contacts. . . a pastoral people makes the most of the periodic pauses in the cycle of the seasons" (Evans, 267), they also had supernatural overtones and were "marked by practices intended to safeguard and protect house and farmyard, crops and pasture, people and livestock" (Ó Danachair, "The Quarter-Days," 53). Customary visitors on these occasions were often believed to be bringers of luck and it was felt important that they be suitably rewarded.

Many of the seasonal visiting customs are remarkably similar in form and in specific elements such as costume and behaviour. For example, like the wren boys in Ireland and the mummers in Newfoundland, the strawboys who visited weddings in Ireland often attempted to remain unrecognised by their hosts. Their straw costume was similar to that of Biddy Boys who visited households on the eve of the 1<sup>st</sup> of February. Recurring in descriptions of these various customs are similar elements such as groups having a captain or leader, men dressed as women, clothes turned inside-out, blackened faces, disguised voices, knocking and requesting entry and pranks played. What I propose to do in this chapter is to discuss a few of this large body of

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<sup>32</sup> See Ó Danachair, Caoimhin. "The Quarter-Days in Irish Tradition" for more information.

customs to provide an idea of the larger context in which the wren boys' house visit operates.

## 8.2 Transferral of Customs to Newfoundland

Apart from Christmas house-visitors, there is little evidence of many other house-visiting customs transferring to Newfoundland from Ireland and England. The relationship of many of these English and Irish customs to the pastoral economy might explain why they didn't survive in a place where the economy was based for the most part on the fishery. There are, however, some remnants of customs relating to the quarter days which seem to have carried over from Ireland. In an article on Irish settlement in Newfoundland, Cyril Byrne refers briefly to the Biddy Boys as existing at one time in Harbour Main (Byrne, 365), and the tradition was also known at one time in Avondale (71-42/61).<sup>33</sup> The practice of erecting a May bush at the beginning of the month still exists in certain communities close to St John's. Halloween celebrations in some Irish communities in Newfoundland also resemble the traditions in the homeland, and no mention is made of Halloween guisers until the introduction of American-style trick-or-treaters.

On Halloween night groups of people would get together, disguise themselves, and go out and steal vegetables. They would congregate at the home of one of

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<sup>33</sup> "February 1<sup>st</sup> is St. Bridget's Day, when the young girls of the community (5-13 approx.) went from house to house with dolls wrapped as babies, and were given as a treat. The only person who knew anything of its origin, Mr Meaney's wife (age 80 approx.) said 'St. Bridget was a widow woman' who always gave generously to the poor, or orphans, or children. In my father's boyhood (around 1930) women gave the girls a needle, or some buttons, or a length of thread, some cotton, or a handkerchief. They sometimes refused to give anything by saying: 'I'm too tired to go upstairs to my chest now,' or a similar excuse. Even in the 1890s, Mrs. Meaney told me, women or relatively well-off children would bake a St Bridget's cake for the little girls. This is sometimes done today, but the girls do not want thread to do needle work, but rather money, and/or fruit, and/or cake. Many of them race from house to house in order to make more money, and are tolerated as a seasonal nuisance for reasons of nostalgia alone. This custom is now kept in neither Harbour Main nor Conception Harbour. At Avondale it survives in this version I have described" (71-42/61).

the members of the group where their vegetables were cooked (all in one boiler). This hodge podge was called Caul Cannon, hence the name given to the event. Into the boiler of vegetables also went a ring, a nail, a piece of wood, a coin and a button. The purpose of the extra ingredients was to determine a part of the future of some of the members. . . .

Another item connected with the same event was that everyone went out and listened intently outside of windows. The first given name they happen to hear mentioned inside the house was supposed to be the given name of the person they would eventually marry (76-379/4, Colliers).

There were also seasonal bonfires held at various times of the year. The English Protestant tradition celebrated Bonfire Night on the fifth of November whereas all-Catholic communities celebrated on St. John's Eve on the twenty-fourth of June or on the eve of November first – one of the quarter days (Schwoeffermann, 79). For the most part, however, these festivals have lost their significance in Newfoundland. This is probably an indication that these calendar customs were not as relevant in the new culture in which the early Irish and English settlers found themselves. Kevin Danaher in The Year in Ireland also points out that “Calendar Custom is deeply influenced by environment. . . . It is intimately connected with the daily and yearly routine of work” (Danaher, *The Year*, 11). Coming from a predominantly agrarian and pastoral background to a lifestyle that was mostly dependent on the fishery the yearly routine of work for the Irish settlers at least changed significantly. Although the settlers had their gardens for subsistence farming, this level of agricultural activity would not have supported the quarter day customs and the fishing schedule might not have allowed for celebrations at these times. Therefore it is not surprising that the practices of calendar custom diminished. Christmas always remained an important holiday however, and many Christmas customs – the wren boys and the mummers amongst them – were preserved in Newfoundland while those from other junctures of the year disappeared.

### 8.3 Ritual Visits

While many Irish and English visiting customs share a common structure, each has its own distinguishing elements relating to the particular festival. There are often distinctive details in the verses to relate them to the occasion of celebration:

The verses also served the purpose of giving notice of the labouring poor's actions. Each verse specified the particular festival date which was being celebrated. Thus, the contributor could be assured that the request for charity was legitimate and authentic. . . . In many cases, the verses indicated that these particular folk charities were to be regarded as 'once-a-year' visitations, and not as irregular or more frequent cadging or begging (Bushaway, 188-9).

What most of these visiting customs have in common is that the visitors seek largesse while visiting the houses of the neighbourhood. Sometimes this largesse might take the form of food or drink, other times money, although to judge by the following account of "Stephening" in Buckinghamshire, England, money seems to have been a later development:

The villagers went to the rectory, where they expected to be given as much ale, bread and cheese as they could consume. This they regarded as their right though why they did is not at all clear. . . . in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century another incumbent managed to persuade the people to accept an annual distribution of money instead of the traditional food and drink (Hole, 32).

This is similar to an Irish account from county Laois that states that food would have been given instead of money to the wren boys in the days when food was more plentiful (IFC 1090: 379).

#### 8.3.1 Effigies

In common with the wren tradition, a number of other visiting customs involved carrying around some kind of effigy or representation and the hosts were expected to provide a reward to those accompanying the effigy. In Ireland the St.

Bridget's Day biddy boys, or Biddies, would go from house to house with a representation of the saint – the *Brideóg* – and solicit money or food and drink on her behalf. They wore disguises of old clothes and straw conical hats that came over their heads and sometimes they would recite a verse upon arriving at the home. An element of the tradition in some places was the use of pieces of straw from the *Brideóg* for making St. Bridget's Day crosses,<sup>34</sup> presumably for the special power that was believed to be in this straw. This is somewhat similar to the tradition in the Isle of Man of fishermen taking a feather from the wren to be used throughout the following year as a luck talisman. In the hobby horse tradition also pieces of hair were occasionally taken from the horse's tail for luck (Gailey, *Irish Folk Drama*, 69). The English tradition of the May Doll described by Christina Hole as “widespread, though not universal” seems similar to that of the *Brideóg*, and again involved carrying around some kind of effigy. In this case the doll was taken from house to house with her face covered and the cover was removed only if a reward – usually monetary – was forthcoming when “the doll's luck-bringing face [was] displayed to the givers” (Hole, 130). The Christmas Bull tradition as practised in Tetbury, Gloucestershire again involves a type of unveiling:

. . . a bull's head. . . was taken round in the Christmas season by three or four men, one of whom carried a small Christmas tree in a pot decorated with red and white tags. They visited houses in the town and also in the surrounding villages, and stood outside singing carols. When the door was opened to them, the head. . . was unveiled and displayed to householders (Hole, 47).

A custom associated with Oak Apple Day (the twenty-ninth of May) was that “The effigy is seated amid and under branches of oak, and the whole is placed in a cart,

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<sup>34</sup> On the eve of the first of February people gather rushes, reeds or straw to make St. Bridget's Day crosses, which are then hung over the doors of the house and the byres. These crosses are believed to protect the home and livestock from harm throughout the following year.

with which its proprietor perambulates the neighbourhood, stopping at each of the better sort of houses, of course in the hope of largesse" (Bushaway, 79). Sometimes similar customs may have merged or overlapped. For example, the wassailers in West Glamorgan in Wales carried a bird with them on their rounds, the "aderyn pica llwyd, an artificial bird in a tree carried by wassailers" (Williams in Cawte, 96). Similarly, on Christmas Day in Pembrokeshire, groups of men carrying a wren would visit houses and sit at the table with the plough stored beneath it. They would join with the hosts in having a beer, and "wet" the plough that lay beneath them (Davies, 61).

### 8.3.2 Verses

I have already mentioned that the final rhyming couplet in the Newfoundland wren verse, "A pocketful of money and a cellarful of beer/We wish you a merry Christmas and a Happy New Year" is not generally found in the wren verse in Ireland. It does, however, appear in the verses of various other house visitors. In the north of Ireland these lines frequently appear near the end of the mummers' play, sometimes as part of a song sung by the whole group after their performance (Gailey, *Irish Folk Drama*, 51). Given that these lines are not very common in the Irish wren tradition, it is possible that they were borrowed from another verse associated with a different tradition. These lines do occur quite commonly in various British traditions. For example part of the Welsh verse of Hogmanay includes the lines "I wish you a merry Christmas and a happy New Year/ A pocket full of money and a cellar full of beer/ And a good fat pig to serve you all the year/ Ladies and gentlemen sat by the fire/ Pity we poor boys out in the mire" (Hutton, 68). The last verse of the Introducer in the Derby Tup tradition also includes these lines: "I'm not 'ere to laugh or cheer/ All we



want's a pocketful o' money and a cellarful o' beer/ Then we'll wish you a merry Christmas and a happy New Year" (Russell, 425) and we have also seen these lines in the Hertfordshire Wassail song (Jones-Baker, 178) and with the young boys of Warwickshire announcing the arrival of the New Year (Palmer, R., 154). The same couplet is also recited by children looking for pennies at the New Year in Herefordshire (Leather, 90).

Customary visitors were often believed to bring luck to the household and not only would refusing hospitality bring bad luck upon the household, but the visitors themselves were likely to wreak some kind of mischief upon the household if they weren't treated as they felt they deserved. For example, those who participated in the English tradition of Shroving would shower with broken crockery the door of anyone who didn't welcome them (Hole, 183). There was also a version of this custom in some of the English settled communities on the South Coast of Newfoundland (Hiscock and Lovelace, personal communication). A subtle threat of such behaviour sometimes appeared in the verses the visitors would recite. For example, in a verse shared by the Irish wren boys and the St. Clement's day visitors on the twenty-third of November, the household is told: "If thou fillst it of the best/ The Lord'll send your soul to rest/ If thou fillst it of the small/ Down goes butler, bowl and all" (Hole, 56-7).

## **8.4 The Economics of the House-visit**

### **8.4.1 Christmas Visitors**

Although ritual visiting occurred throughout the year these visits were especially common at Christmas, serving as a device to supplement Christmas income at a time of need "to provide the poorer members of a community with another means

of raising money or obtaining food and drink at midwinter" (Hutton, 88). Around Christmas time there were, amongst others, the wassailers, carollers, mummers, catterners and those who went thomasing. Christmas was a time when extended hospitality and generosity were expected, particularly of landowners towards their tenants (Hutton, 54). The notion of distributing largesse at this time became widespread and the tradition of employers giving Christmas boxes to their employees on the twenty-sixth of December influenced the change of name from St. Stephen's Day to Boxing Day. The notion of the poor receiving "customary doles" (Bushaway, 46) operates on the presumption that these visits were always made by the poor to the rich. This was not always the case however, and we have seen that in Newfoundland the wren boys mostly visited amongst equals.

#### **8.4.2 Money as Rightful Due**

According to Bob Bushaway in his work on custom and ceremony in England, the people who participated in these traditions were usually of the lower class but they believed that the money they solicited through these customs was their rightful due as part of "the responsibilities of the wealthy for their poorer neighbours" (Bushaway, 188). Harvest largesse, for example, was extra money that harvest workers would solicit as an addition to their wage from those passing the fields where they were at work (Bushaway, 131). The workers' attitude towards this collection was that "the collection was part of the harvest contract and was no more than their customary due, forming an essential part of their wages for the work" (Bushaway, 133). Even though these customs may not have originated with monetary gain in mind, the potential economic gain surely became a motivator. An Irish woman settled in Newfoundland

noted with regard to the wren tradition in her homeland “I think it was the lower classes, sure it was. They were people who needed a few dollars. I’d say they pooled the money and had a little drink” (Hanrahan, 101). The participants did make an effort to distinguish their visits from those of mere beggars, however. References often appear in the verses used by the various visitors to refute the idea that they are beggars in any way. For example a rhyme recited at Hogmanay on the east coast of Scotland goes “Rise up, aul wife, an shack yer feathers/ Dinna think it we are beggars/ We’re only bairnies come to play/ Rise up and gee’s wir hogmanay” (Hutton, 65). A similar example occurs in the Irish wren verse.

#### **8.4.3 Visiting Wealthy Houses**

Circumstances would have played a large part in deciding whom to visit. With regard to outport Newfoundland for example, there were few very well-off houses. Thus, the option to visit wealthier households did not exist. Only in the city was this type of visit possible and the earlier accounts of the tradition in St. John’s indicate that soliciting money was central to the custom in these circumstances. Generally however, Newfoundland ritual visiting took place within the social group and operated within a different framework of hospitality and reciprocity. In Newfoundland the emphasis is on the visit and on sharing the pleasures of Christmas while collecting money is unimportant. Irish wren boys, however, had the opportunity to visit the houses of the bigger farmers or landlords, and their purpose was to solicit money from these households. With regard to other Irish visiting customs, the strawboys in Ireland (a group who would arrive at the wedding party uninvited and entertain with dancing etc. in exchange for some drinks) also frequently visited the local “gentry” as well as

families in the area. This was also true of the biddy boys and an account from Killarney, county Kerry, states that it was the gentry that really kept this custom alive in that area.

. . . all the local gentry seem to have encouraged the Biddies, and each crowd had its own territory. . . . Perhaps the war helped to finish the custom. . . . But there were other reasons besides emigration: the 'troubles' of the early 1920s, the disapproval of the Church, and especially, I think, the loss of the local gentry after the 1903 Land Act. . . . Here it was the gentry who had made the custom their own (Hilliard, 101-102).

This account is particularly interesting as it might often appear that it is the performers who control whether or not a custom will survive. However, if, as Martin Lovelace suggests with regard to the English Mummers' Play, many of these customs were designed as a means of soliciting money from the upper classes (Lovelace, 271), then the survival and success of the tradition was dependent upon an accessible and well-off audience. Without an audience to provide for the visitors, the tradition would likely die out. Alternatively, as we have seen with the Newfoundland wren boys, the custom might adapt to its new circumstances.

#### 8.4.4 Theories of degeneration

Discussing the economic motivation behind these seasonal perambulations, Alex Helm commented: "Begging became the aim of traditional ceremonies very early and must be considered one of the chief factors which kept them alive long after their original purpose was forgotten" (Helm, *The Chapbook*, 8). Helm was of the school of thought that believed in a ritual origin for these customs that had since degenerated into a form of begging. Many of these theories originated with Sir James Frazer whose work *The Golden Bough* influenced many of the earlier researchers of folk drama. Throughout this book Frazer proposes that these customs originated from

a fertility cult but that the deeper meaning had been lost over time. The later forms of the customs were mere degenerations of a more meaningful ancient ritual of fertility, with the “folk” having lost sight of the “true” meaning of these customs over time. It was not sufficient for these scholars to think that these customs may merely have been motivated by social and economic factors:

A primitive *ludus*, still performed by the folk on seasonal occasions, may be expected to have some significance other than that of mere amusement, even though it may only dimly survive in a vague notion that the whole thing is done for ‘luck’ (Chambers, 216).

However, as Bushaway points out with regards to custom in Britain: “the social and economic functions of folk custom were of greater significance to the labouring poor than were memories of past religious systems” (Bushaway, 48). These past religious systems were likely only a preoccupation of the scholars and not of the participants. Ronald Hutton points out in his book The Stations of the Sun, the importance of “the purpose of calendar customs, or seasonal pastimes, *is at any given time*” (Hutton, iix, my emphasis). For a custom to survive at a certain time, it must provide a function relevant to the people of that time. Thus it is not, as Frazer *et al.* suggest, that a more significant purpose to the performance has been forgotten by the performers and that they are performing something which they do not understand, but rather that the focus and relevance of the tradition has changed. Not only that but, as Hutton points out, more often than not the participants themselves were, and are, conscious of the function these customs fulfil for themselves (Hutton, iix). These earlier scholars tended to ignore this fact or considered it unimportant even though the attitudes of the participants towards the customs is something which is vital to the attempted interpretation of any tradition.

### 8.5 Conclusion

It has been shown that rather than being an isolated tradition, the wren tradition is just one of a greater complex of house-visiting traditions. However, it is one of the few visiting customs that continued when the Irish and English settled in Newfoundland. One of the primary reasons why many calendar customs did not transfer was the significant change in culture and environment experienced by the Newfoundland immigrants. The change in lifestyle did not support the practice of many of the calendar customs practised in the homeland – those associated with the agricultural calendar for example. Christmas still remained an important holiday however, and both the wren boy and the mummering traditions continued on.

The new conditions also prompted traditions to adapt, thus the practice of soliciting money which was a central part of so many other house-visiting customs was not as prominent in Newfoundland traditions. Instead the wren tradition became more of a social activity at Christmas time during which people shared hospitality in the form of food and drink instead of distributing money. The customs that did survive may have been influenced by knowledge of other calendar customs which might explain, for example, the presence of the rhyming couplet in the Newfoundland wren tradition that is not common to the Irish tradition. Although the Newfoundland wren tradition more than likely originated in Ireland, its successful adaptation to the new environment has ensured its survival in Newfoundland culture as a tradition in its own right.

## 9. Conclusion

The Wren tradition in Newfoundland is to be found for the most part in the strongly Irish and Roman Catholic communities and it is most likely that it was introduced to the province directly from Ireland. Although the custom remained remarkably similar to the Irish form overall, there were a few significant differences. For example, Irish wren boys often attempted to disguise themselves whereas Newfoundland wren boys did not. In the Irish accounts it appears that the importance of disguise diminished over time and it is possible that the tradition had reached this point by the time it was introduced to Newfoundland. None of the earliest written accounts in Newfoundland mention costume, although the descriptions of the straw costume of the wren boys in Conception Harbour indicate that disguise was not completely unknown. Accounts of the costumes of the Newfoundland mummers seem to resemble more closely descriptions of Irish wren boy costumes.

Within Newfoundland itself the wren tradition differs very little from community to community although there are elements characteristic of particular communities. For example, in Renew's on the Southern Shore the tradition usually finished at noon, and in Boyd's Cove, Notre Dame Bay, the host would add a ribbon to the bush carried by the wren boys.

Evidence from Irish versions of the wren rhyme would seem to indicate that the additional rhyming couplet ("With a pocketful of money. . .happy New Year") that appears in most Newfoundland versions was not widespread in Ireland. Again, the verse may have been introduced to Newfoundland in this form (and it does appear as part of the verse as early as 1842) but clearly it evolved differently in Ireland

where the couplet seems to have disappeared from most versions of the rhyme while being retained in the majority of Newfoundland verses. This couplet also appears in the verses of various British house-visitors and the existence of these lines in Newfoundland tradition might be indicative of influence from the English settlers. Many of the strongly Irish outports – along the Southern Shore for example – were first settled by the English with the Irish arriving relatively late. Even though Irish settlers came to dominate these communities, some English settlers remained. Many of them married into the newly-arrived Irish families, converting to Roman Catholicism as they did so and becoming assimilated into Irish-Newfoundland culture.<sup>35</sup> These English settlers may have introduced traditions of their own into the family at least, if not into the community as a whole. The mix of cultures in Newfoundland is one reason why it is almost impossible to make a definitive statement as to the origins of particular customs and traditions here.

Although there is a large complex of house-visiting customs in Ireland and Britain, it appears that only a small number of these were introduced to or survived in Newfoundland. It is possible that many of the calendar customs practised in the homeland were not suited to the different lifestyle in Newfoundland and those which couldn't adapt successfully simply died out. The wren tradition seems to have been one of those which was suited to the new social structure. It was practised at a time of year when families and communities were at home as the fishing season was finished and preparations were being made for the following year. The social nature of the wren tradition which involved visiting as many people as possible in the community

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<sup>35</sup> This is why some English surnames, i.e. Bishop, are found in what one would presume to be strongly Irish Roman Catholic families of Newfoundland



fits nicely into a culture where social-casual house-visiting was such an important part of everyday life.

The collection, or non-collection, of money is one of the most significant differences between the Newfoundland tradition and its Irish counterpart. Although the Newfoundland economy could not support ritual visits made with the purpose of collecting money, hospitality could be offered in the form of food and drink. The success of the wren tradition in making this change and in adjusting to suit the different conditions ensured its survival.

Occasionally wren boys may be referred to as mummers and often there is little distinction made between the two traditions. However, whereas mummering today is enjoying a new wave of popularity and is regarded as an integral part of contemporary Newfoundland culture, the wren tradition has been little recognised or commented upon. The fact that the distribution of the wren custom is very limited and that it is rarely known outside Irish-Newfoundland communities is clearly one reason for this “neglect.” Interest in mummering at all levels – from the participation of the “folk” through to the analysis of the academics – is what has transformed mummering into an “iconic” tradition.

One of the main differences between the wren boys and the mummers is the latter’s use of disguise, which provides them with a kind of licence the wren boys don’t have. Disguise offers the mummers an opportunity to act out of character and in the past this occasion was often used in a somewhat sinister way to settle grudges or to mete out punishments in the community. The mummers were often regarded fearfully, their disguise making them strangers even in their home communities. There is no evidence for this kind of behaviour with the wren boys. Their motivation was

primarily social and they set out to visit as many people as possible on St. Stephen's Day, and of course to enjoy plenty of food, drink and fun along the way. Not only were the visits enjoyable for the visitors but they were also eagerly anticipated by the householders. The visitors generally provided entertainment of some sort – singing, music, dancing, reciting etc., and their arrival may have prompted the beginning of a “time.”

For some people then, the importance of the wren tradition lay in having extra visitors and a bit of fun. For others it was an occasion of nostalgia as the arrival of the wren boys recalled Christmases of the past. The tradition also had importance in preserving the community's link with their Irish heritage. Indeed the wren tradition can be seen as a testament to the Irish-Newfoundlanders and their success in making a new life in *Talamh an Éisc*.<sup>36</sup> Thousands of miles from home they successfully adjusted to a completely different way of life while still maintaining a strong link with their homeland. Inevitably, however, the new environment wrought changes in the customs and traditions and from these changes emerged a form of the wren tradition that is unique to Newfoundland.

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<sup>36</sup> The Irish term for Newfoundland. It translates literally as “The Land of the Fish.”

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## APPENDIX I

### **Irish Settlement in Newfoundland**

The authority on Irish settlement in Newfoundland is Dr. John Mannion of the Geography department at Memorial University and much of my information on this topic has been taken from his research.

Irish involvement with Newfoundland began about 1675 when the fishing ships leaving the southwest of England en route to Newfoundland began to call at southern ports of Ireland such as New Ross, Waterford, Youghal and Cork to collect provisions and to recruit labour for the fishing season (Mannion, "Irish Migration," 267). Mannion has established that eighty-five percent of Irish immigrants to Newfoundland came from a relatively small area within forty miles radius of Waterford city. This area encompasses parts of the four counties of Waterford, Kilkenny, Wexford and Tipperary. Another eleven percent came from the counties of Cork, Carlow and Kerry and the last four percent came from twenty-one other counties (Mannion, "The Irish Migrations," 6).

From about 1550 Europeans were fishing off Newfoundland. Whereas the continental Europeans caught and salted their catch and returned directly to Europe, the English had to dry their fish ashore simply because they did not have access to large supplies of salt which the French, Spanish and Portuguese did. According to Mannion this "was a major factor in the eventual establishment of English hegemony in eastern Newfoundland, and led to colonisation and settlement" (Mannion, "Southern Shore," 6). Initially the fishery was a summer one only and settlement was actively discouraged. Eventually, however, ships began to leave some of their crews



in Newfoundland for the winter to repair equipment and build stages for the following season (Dillon, 10). This custom of over-wintering eventually led to European settlement.

Many of the Irish were employed to work in the fishery for two summers and a winter. Most of these so-called "youngsters" were single males between fifteen and twenty-five years old. As younger sons of small farmers they were unlikely to inherit any land at home, thus work in the migratory fishery appealed to them. Although some of them stayed on and settled in the many coves and harbours along the coast of Newfoundland, in the early days of the migratory fishery they seldom stayed for more than a winter or two and settlement was slow. Statistics showing the number of Irish arriving in Newfoundland during this time can sometimes be misinterpreted. For example, passenger lists from the eighteenth century show large numbers of Irish passengers arriving to work in the migratory fishery, but only a relatively small number of these actually settled. Some returned to the homeland, and others merely used Newfoundland as a stepping-stone to greater North America. Mannion notes that it was not until women began to arrive in the province, to work as servants etc., that settlement really became firmly established. By 1742 the Irish made up about fifty percent of the population of St. John's and by the mid-eighteenth century most of the southeast coast of the Avalon Peninsula between St. John's and Placentia was dominated by the Irish (Smallwood, 73-74). By the 1800s, according to Mannion, "seasonal migration had become emigration" and between 1800 and 1830, thirty to thirty-five thousand Irish arrived in Newfoundland. Although not all of these immigrants stayed, nevertheless by 1836 there were approximately thirty-eight

thousand Irish living in Newfoundland, more than five times the number that were there in 1800 (Mannion in Casey, "Irish Culture," 208).

Today approximately forty percent of the Newfoundland population are of Irish origin (Casey, "Irish Culture," 204), the majority of whom still remain on the Avalon Peninsula. More than three hundred years after the first Irish came to Newfoundland, certain elements of Irish culture remain strong in the province. Even the speech of the Newfoundland-Irish today still has distinctly Irish words such as "sleeven" or "streel," and Irish syntax "I'm after doing." The music and culture of the province today also bears a distinct relationship to that of Ireland. This thesis discusses the tradition of the wren and its Irish origins but there are also less tangible elements of culture such as folk belief which have been preserved in both cultures to the present day. The preservation of the Irish culture in Newfoundland illustrates the strong empathy that still remains amongst Irish-Newfoundlanders with their ancestral home.

## APPENDIX II

## Examples of the wren verse in Britain and Ireland:

## The Wren Verse in Wales

The Cutty Wren

O where are you going? says Milder to Melder (or "Molder").  
 O where are you going? says the younger to the elder (or "older")  
 O I cannot tell, says Festel to Fose;  
 We're going to the woods, says John the Red Nose.  
 We're going to the woods, says John the Red Nose.

O what will you do there? says Milder to Melder,  
 O what will you do there? says the younger to the elder,  
 O I do not know, says Festel to Fose;  
 To shoot the cutty wren, says John the Red Nose.  
 To shoot the cutty wren, says John the Red Nose.

O what will you shoot her with? says Milder to Melder,  
 O what will you shoot her with? says the younger to the elder,  
 O I cannot tell, says Festel to Fose;  
 With bows and with arrows, says John the Red Nose.  
 With bows and with arrows, says John the Red Nose.

O that will not do, says Milder to Melder,  
 O that will not do, says the younger to the elder,  
 O what will do then, says Festel to Fose;  
 With great guns and cannons, says John the Red Nose.  
 With great guns and cannons, says John the Red Nose.

O what will you bring her home in? says Milder to Melder,  
 O what will you bring her home in? says the younger to the elder,  
 O I cannot tell, says Festel to Fose;  
 On four strong men's shoulders, says John the Red Nose.  
 On four strong men's shoulders, says John the Red Nose.

O that will not do, says Milder to Melder,  
 O that will not do, says the younger to the elder,  
 O what will do then? says Festel to Fose;  
 On big carts and wagons, says John the Red Nose.  
 On big carts and wagons, says John the Red Nose.

O what will you cut her up with? says Milder to Melder,  
 O what will you cut her up with? says the younger to the elder,  
 O I do not know, says Festel to Fose;  
 With knives and with forks, says John the Red Nose.  
 With knives and with forks, says John the Red Nose.

O that will not do, says Milder to Melder,  
O that will not do, says the younger to the elder,  
O what will do then? says Festel to Fose;  
With hatchets and cleavers, says John the Red Nose.  
With hatchets and cleavers, says John the Red Nose.

What will you boil her in? says Milder to Melder,  
What will you boil her in? says the younger to the elder,  
O I cannot tell, says Festel to Fose;  
In pots and in kettles, says John the Red Nose.  
In pots and in kettles, says John the Red Nose.

O that will not do, says Milder to Melder,  
O that will not do, says the younger to the elder,  
O what will do then? says Festel to Fose;  
In brass pans and cauldrons, says John the Red Nose.  
In brass pans and cauldrons, says John the Red Nose.

(Harrison in Gill, 386-7)

**The Wren Verse in the Isle of Man**We'll Hunt the Wren

We'll away to the wood, says Robin to Bobbin,  
We'll away to the wood, says Richard to Robin,  
We'll away to the wood, says Jack of the Land,  
We'll away to the wood, says every one.

What shall we do there? etc.

We'll hunt the wren, etc.

Where is he? where is he? etc.

In yonder green bush, etc.

I see him, I see him, etc.

How shall we get him down? etc.

With sticks and with stones, etc.

He is dead, he is dead, etc.

How shall we get him home? etc.

We'll hire a cart, etc.

Whose cart shall we hire? etc.

Johnny Bill Fell's etc.

Who will stand driver? etc.

Filly the Tweet, etc.

He's home, he's home, etc.

How shall we get him boiled? etc.

In the brewery pan etc.

How shall we get him in? etc.

With iron bars and a rope, etc.

He is in, he is in, etc.

He is boiled, he is boiled, etc.

How shall we get him out? etc.

With a long pitchfork, etc.

He is out, he is out, etc.

Who's to dine at the dinner? etc.

The King and Queen etc.

How shall we get him eat? etc.

With knives and with forks, etc.

He is eat, he is eat, etc.

The eyes for the blind, etc.

The legs for the lame, etc.

The pluck for the poor etc.

The bones for the dog, says Robin to Bobbin,  
The bones for the dog, says Richard to Robin,  
The bones for the dog, says Jack of the Land,  
The bones for the dog, says every one.

(Gill, 384-385)

### The Wren Verse in England

We'll go a shooting, says Richard to Robin,  
 We'll go a shooting, says Robin to Bobbin,  
 We'll go a shooting, says Jonathan Young,  
 We'll go a shooting, says every one

What shall us shoot? etc.

I see a wren, etc.

We'll all shoot together, etc.

She's down, she's down, etc.

How shall we get her home? etc.

We'll borrow feyther's cart, etc./ We must hire a wagon etc.

How shall us get her in? etc.

We must hire some ropes, etc.

We'll all heave together, etc.

How shall us cook her? etc.

We'll buy/borrow a furnace, etc.

We must hire a cook, etc.

What shall us gie her? etc.

We must gie her the feathers, etc.

That won't be enough, etc.

We must gie her the bones, etc.

The feathers will choke her, etc.

The feathers *have* choked her, etc.

So the poor cook is dead, etc.

What shall us do with the braath? (broth), etc.

Gie't to the poor of the parish, etc.

(Gill, 394-395 from Journal of the Folk-Song Society)



The Clancys' Version of the Wren Verse, a variation of which was used in Colliers, Conception Bay, Newfoundland on St. Stephen's Day, 2002.

The wran, the wran the king of all birds,  
 St Stephen's day was caught in the furze,  
 Although he was little his honour was great  
 Jump up me lads  
 And give us a trate

As I went down to Killinall,  
 I met the wran upon the wall  
 Up with me bottle and knocked him down  
 And brought him in to Carrigtown

Dreóilín, dreóilín where's your nest  
 'Tis in the bush that I love best  
 'Tis in the bush, it's the holly tree  
 Where all the boys do follow me

Up with the kettle and down with the pan  
 And give us a penny to bury the wran,

We followed the wran three miles or more,  
 Three miles or more, three miles or more.  
 We followed the ran three miles and more  
 At six o'clock in the morning,

Mrs. Clancy is a very good woman,  
 A very good woman, a very good woman  
 Oh Mrs. Clancy's a very good woman,  
 She'll give us a penny to bury the wran.

This version taken from the LP "So early in the Morning: Irish Children's Traditional Songs, Rhymes, and Games" Collected by Diane Hamilton and Sung by the Robert Clancy grandchildren, Peg Clancy Power and Bobby Clancy c. 1961.







